

# JEEVADHARA

*A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION*

## INDIAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

TOWARD AN INDIAN HERMENEUTICS OF THE BIBLE

*Thomas Manikkam*

NO POOJA BUT PREMA, NO YAJNA BUT ISWARA JNANA

*Mathew V. Kuzhuvelil*

AN INDIAN UNDERSTANDING OF PROPHET AMOS TODAY

*George Koonthanam*

THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS AND ITS

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*Joseph Pathrapankal*

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

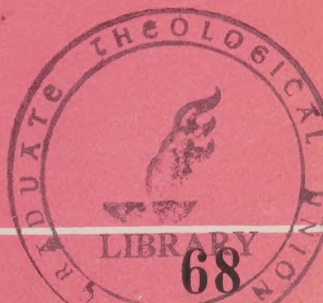
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THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF PAUL RICOEUR TO

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS.

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BOOK REVIEWS



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# JEEVADHARA

## The Word of God

INDIAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

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# Editorial

“Indian theology” and “Indian biblical hermeneutics” are expressions both current and fascinating these days. Of late christian theologians in India are becoming impatient with the type of theology that is transmitted and taught in our theological schools. They feel that theology should take its roots in the living context of our people, and not imported from elsewhere. Though nothing definitive has been reached yet, there is at least a certain consensus that an Indian theology worth the name should take into account the rich religious tradition of India as well as the cultural and social context of this country. The presence of these two factors is precisely that makes Indian theology entirely different from any other theology, for example, the Latin American theology, about which there is much discussion today.

It seems that an Indian biblical hermeneutics is also a desideratum so much so that very little or practically nothing has been done so far along this line. Except for a few articles appearing here and there, no combined and concerted effort is made to bring together Indian Catholic Bible specialists, about seventy in number teaching in theological institutions or working in other fields in this country. Even the Catholic Biblical Association of India, an association of Indian Catholic Bible specialists, has not come forward to face this challenge.

How are we to teach, study and read the Bible in India today? Is it at all possible to have an Indian interpretation of the Bible? People who are accustomed to the objectivist, one dimensional approach to hermeneutics which holds that any text of the Bible has only one true meaning, which is independent of the cultural condition of the reader, would answer the question in the negative. For them the obvious meaning is the literal one and it is the same for all. But there is still another approach possible, namely, the critical approach. It is an approach which recognises that the Bible is the end product of a long and complex process of literary history and that any study of it would require a scientific approach by which we

arrive at the meaning intended by the author. Thanks to the encouragement given by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) and by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its *Introduction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels* (1964), Roman Catholics are in an advantageous position to carry on their critical scholarship and scientific methods in studying and teaching the Bible. The series of 'criticisms' now available: historical criticism, textual criticism, literary criticism, form criticism redaction criticism and so on are all at the disposal of Catholic Scholars. All these criticisms are qualified as "scientific" and hence are to be appreciated.

But it seems that all these 'criticisms' which have already rendered their service to biblical scholarship, are now become almost obsolete and irrelevant and to a great extent ineffective. Now we are in need of a new hermeneutics that will satisfy the new needs of a humanity which is struggling in and through history: Deutero-Isaiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon giving them hope and assisted them in their struggle for a liberated life. He spoke about the power and vitality of God's word which can do that for which it is uttered by God in the same way as rain and snow make the earth fertile and fruitful (Is. 55: 10-12). The author of the letter to the Hebrews exhorted his readers to march towards the goal of their pilgrimage, for which he reminds them of the power of God's word (Hb. 4:2). What we see in all these is God's purpose in assisting humanity through his word. God's word is not meant for the abstract academic exercise of scholars, it should be the basis and support for creative thinking and action for evolving a just and human society. The whole question is one of relevance and meaning.

When we speak about relevance in the Indian situation today, there are two issues which should be taken care of as the immediate objective of an Indian biblical hermeneutics. The two major issues which make up the reality of India today are the 'religious' and the 'social', the wealth of India's religious traditions and the desperate economic poverty of its people. Opinions are divided as to what should be treated as urgent and imperative. But it seems that both these are complementary, although apparently they are opposed. A 'religious'



reading of the Bible will apply the traditional methods of Indian exegesis to the biblical text and transpose its Hebrew and Greek symbols to Indian situation and thought-patterns; a 'social' reading will enable the scholars to study the Bible in the light of a liberating praxis among the socially oppressed and exploited. Both these will ultimately enable the Church to see the Bible as an open book which speaks to our culture and to our people.

What Gustavo Gutierrez did a decade ago, confronted as he was with the challenge of his society and the history of his country, we have to be doing today. His task was to interpret the situation of his country in the light of his religion and the Scriptures which were supposed to define that religion for him and for his people. He reacted to the established principles of interpreting religion and its relation to society, principles which were handed down through centuries without reference to time, culture and the needs of the society. It was a reaction to theology understood as wisdom and rational knowledge and at the same time it was an attempt to establish theology as a critical reflection on historical praxis based on the Gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America. The power he released through this bold interpretation of the Gospel is making inroads in many countries of the Third World and is challenging men and women to commit themselves to a more radical and relevant interpretation of their religion and Scriptures.

The various authors writing in this issue of *Jeevadhara* are trying to articulate their thoughts and concerns about a problem so vital and relevant for India. It is only the starting point, but we do hope that it is a beginning. There is need of further clarifications, further discussions, but we have to march forward with courage and determination, with self-respect and self-discipline. How else could we come out of our inherited passivity and blind subordination and submissiveness?

# Toward an Indian Hermeneutics of the Bible

In recent times there is much enthusiasm for cross-cultural studies on the religious scriptures of the major religions. One of the avenues of such cross-cultural study is the area of Hermeneutics. As generally understood it is the area of interpreting the sacred scriptures or the written texts of the living religious traditions. As a scientific discipline Hermeneutics is a systematic approach towards the understanding, interpretation, and exposition of the meaning of the texts of the scriptures. This description is applicable to any academic study done on a text in view of making its sense more clear to the readers. Hence writing a commentary (*bhāṣya*), making a translation (*bhāṣāntara*), or writing a *kārika* (prose-version of the *sūtras*) or preparing a compendium (*saṃgraha*), or a glossary (*ṭippaṇī*) or brief notes (*ṭīkā*), all need apply common principles of scientific analysis of the meaning of words and sentences and give explanation of the implications of the various usages and nuances of the names and phrases, as well as offer discourses on the connotations and denotations of the terms employed in the text. All these constitute the subject matter of Hermeneutics as understood in Indian traditions especially in the *Mīmāṃsa*, *Vyākaraṇa* and *Vedānta* schools. The technical terms used for Hermeneutics are *mīmāṃsa* (systematic investigation) and *artha-jñāna* (science of meaning) according to the *Mīmāṃsa* school of philosophy; *padārtha-śāstra* and *vākyārthaśāstra* (science of the meaning of words/sentences) are the terms used in the treatise of *Vākyapadīya* by Bhaṭṭhari, the Grammarian. In addition to the frequent use of the same terms of the predecessors Sankarācārya, the first commentator of *Brahmasūtras*, (Vedānta) employs *jijñāsa* (investigation) to mean systematic enquiry into the meaning of the Word ("Brahman"). With these various nuances in mind I prefer to use the term Hermeneutics in its most comprehensive sense.



## Problematics of cross-cultural Hermeneutics

Revelation, whether it happened in the Hebrew cultural milieu or in the Aryan-Hindu milieu, had been circumscribed by time, place and the literary patterns (culture) of expression of a particular people. Only part of what had been revealed is believed to have been handed down in writing; the rest had been continued in the oral transmission and living tradition of the people. But the written portion of the "Revelation" is encased in the archaic expressions of the language of the people of the time of writing, while the living tradition continues to grow and change by the passage of time; and in that process it accumulates into its body-concepts new patterns of thought by means of the exchange of ideas by interactions, elimination and assimilation of other cultural elements, and in the long run the written portion of its belief-system derived from the original "Revelation" becomes unintelligible to the new generation, especially when the new generation, ceased to be familiar with the language and usage of the people of their ancestry. This itself is sufficient reason for a new hermeneutics of the text in the new context of the life of the people in tune with the living tradition of "Revelation". To add to this crisis of irrelevance of the old style and concepts of the scriptures, the challenging contributions of science, culture, humanities, technology and mass media as well as international and inter-continental transactions of people brought to the awakening of the consciousness of people about the new horizons of understanding even "Revelation" and its allied concepts. Ours is an age of such fast movements and mutations in human transactions that cross-cultural understanding of the presuppositions of religions, creeds and claims of revelations, has already started exhibiting its beneficial fruits in many aspects of the phenomenon of religion, to mention a few, in missionary activities, human relations, diplomatic exchanges, inter-disciplinary studies even in universities, dialogue contexts, as well as in big industries like Movies and T. V.s.

To view religion and its allied systems on a wider scale of human life has become almost the rule of life on a global level, even though quite a good number of ghettos are still closed against any reformation or transformation or metamor-

phosis. Further no particular culture can claim absoluteness in the matter of being able to communicate as the sole representative of the Divine; for the same reason no language in any given history had been capable of maintaining the perfect form of human communication of the experiences of mankind which are so varied and multiple and concretely pluralistic. In the same vein one will have to accept the simple truth that no conceptual or philosophical or theological system of any group of people had been so far fool-proof standard for meeting the evergrowing challenges of human discoveries in the possibilities of human consciousness. Hence a basic need is felt to test the claims of every culture with those of others.

Religion is said to be fundamentally a cultural expression; and cross-cultural Hermeneutics should provide the correct tools for its right expression. The Bible and the biblical religions need not be exceptions to this understanding of religion, simply because these religions too claimed to possess "Revelation" of some special kind; there won't be any damage to this claim as long as these religions are open to make self-examinations of their claims in the wider context of man's religiosity or irreligiosity today. New hermeneutical challenges should make these religions more at home with every other pilgrim's way and perhaps can even make them richer in their human potential to serve mankind in more sympathetic and tolerant attitudes and concerns and to be much more dialogical than dogmatic, and to be open minded to understand and appreciate God's working in other communities as well. To understand God's "Revelation" as "His Word in the words of men" is a sufficient definition to start with, and move toward developing an Indian Hermeneutics of the Bible so that the biblical revelation may be better understood in the Indian context, and the Hindu revelation, as they claim to be, may be more intelligible when complemented by the Semitic claims of historical revelation.

### **Selected Hermeneutical Schools in Indian Traditions**

In this search for cross-cultural hermeneutical tools to understand the biblical revelation in Indian religious context, three classical schools of Hermeneutics have been selected -

schools which were *exprofesso* engaged in the interpretation of the Vedic revelation: They are the *Mīmāṃsā* of Jaimini followed by its earliest commentator Śabara; the *Vyākaraṇa* school of Bhaṭṭṛhari, poet, philosopher and grammarian, and the *Vedāntic* school of Śrī Śaṅkara, the first of the three Acāryas, who maintained a dialectical opposition towards *Mīmāṃsā*, but a dialogical affinity with Bhaṭṭṛhari who seems to have anticipated quite a good deal of the advaitic experience in his Hermeneutics though it was structurally grammatical in nature and function. It goes without saying that these selections are not exhaustive in the sense of not taking for further study on the same line the hermeneutical tools of Rāmānujācārya and Madhvācārya, the theistic advaitins, or of Dayānanda Saraswati, the Vedic revivalist, or of Śrī Aurobindo, the modern synthesizer of Vedic insights as relevant to modern times. The classical schools of Hermeneutics of the Vedic tradition are chosen here only with the intention that they might be a footing to go further in the continuity of later masters.

## I

### The Mīmāṃsā School of Hermeneutics

The Mīmāṃsā school headed by Jaimini, the *sutrakāra*, and Śabara as its first known commentator (*bhāṣhyakāra*) followed by Prabhākara and Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, concentrated mostly on a realistic, literal and liturgically oriented interpretation of the Vedic *Samhitas*. Though we may notice a heavily brahmanical and ritualistic tone in the exposition, some of the linguistic principles they applied in Hermeneutics are commendable and even applicable today in cross-cultural Hermeneutics related to non-vedic scriptures as well, preferably in making translations and critical commentaries of the Bible in Indian context. The very investigation of the Mīmāṃsā school is into the meaning and function (*dharma*) of the words used in the text of the "Revelation" (*Śruti*, i.e. the Vedic *Samhitas* and *Brahmaṇas*). This is what every translator or commentator must know from the very outset. But this cannot be obtained without having thoroughness with the literary genres and the linguistic patterns and usages of the common people for whose understanding the scriptures were first written. Hence the following



hermeneutical principles of the Mīmāṃsa school are of some interest to us also in our search for cross-cultural tools for interpreting the Bible in Indian religious context.

### 1. Prefer the meaning of the Common People (*laukikārtha*)

This principle was defended against some arguments put forward by certain opposing schools of *Mīmāṃsa pūrva pakṣa*) who argued that the Vedic words may contain something peculiar beyond the reach of the common man of this world (*loka*) and so every word or sentence must be interpreted with the specialities attributed to *Vaidika-vākyas* (sentences of Vedic injunctions) which are understood by an enlightened group of scholars. The argument was strongly rejected by Jaimini and Śābara and they proposed the simple principle of following the “common sense” current among the people. Otherwise the very purpose of “Revelation” and its recording will be defeated. The purpose of “Revelation” is the understanding of the people about the right ways and means of attaining *svarga* (eternal bliss). To achieve this the people should understand without much difficulty and strain the meaning of the words used in the scriptures. The writers or the “composers” of scriptures themselves seem to have taken note of this purpose and they used simple language using the common words (*laukika-pada* / *laukika vākyā*) of the common people of the time. The interpreter’s job is to make the same sense of the scriptural words available to the common man of today who lives in the continuity of the common human heritage, though in different cultural context and historical phase. Ofcourse, it is understood that the interpreter should be an interlocutor (*dvibhāṣī*) between the common man of the time of the composing of scriptures and the common man of today (or of the interpreter’s time and culture). He should have the command of the words and their linguistic usage in the original language of the scriptures as well as their corresponding expressions together with their emotional charges and nuances in the usages of the new language to which translation or commentary is written. Only then semantic fidelity is maintained in Hermeneutics when it is done in a different linguistic and cultural context.

The above stated principle is also based on the assumption that language is more than a mere tool of communication of ideas. Language even embodies and enshrines the fundamental world views, attitude, temperaments and even expectations of the people. They are all intertwined. Modern linguistics elaborate this understanding sufficiently clear. Hence a text which was first written in the common man's imagination, understanding and expectations should be interpreted, and its sense updated to today's common man's understanding of the message of "Revelation". The word which the common man uses are the "words of men" in and through which God speaks on the level of the intelligibility of men and communicates His "Word" (Will) to them so that they may understand His "Will" and act accordingly in view of achieving the bliss of God (svarga). To me this is a principle having significant application in our understanding and interpretation of the material of the Bible especially of the New Testament. The "Good News" addressed to the poor and the ordinary fishermen, the tax collectors, the blind, the lame and the lepers by a Man who could understand the feelings of people and communicate to them the "mysteries of the Kingdom", should be again "Good News" to us also who are not quite different from those "common people" of the biblical times, having the same and even many more problems. This should keep us sufficiently warned from the impositions (*adhyāsa*) of the "existential predicaments" of the "crises of meaninglessness" of the Euro American "supermen" who invite all "the enlightened" for "radical demythologization" of the "scriptures" of the "major world religions". Authenticity to one's own culture and value systems is no impediment to be sufficiently open to others' cultures and claims provided we still have some power of discernment (*virāka*) left in ourselves. The common man is still the backbone of any society and his terms of understanding and expectations constitute the language of any new milieu to which "Revelation" is addressed.

## 2. Popular sense as the link between the Word and the Meaning

This is a further specification of the principle stated above as a corroborative argument. The *laukika* usage is the only means of getting acquainted with the original sense of

the Word. Because the Scriptures were originally written in the usage of the people of the time for their posterity's understanding. Even the proper names (*nāmadheya*) which are not translatable (*paribhāṣikā*) convey the ordinary meaning of the words. Hence the 'common sense' derived from the constant usage of the common people should be the general sense of the words and sentences of a text.

Concerning the understanding of the Vedic words as "non-personal" (*apauruṣeya*) in which the ordinary words of the people are also included Śabara has this argument to make: All words, their meaning, and the relationship (*sambandha*) between them are all "non-personal" and eternal (*nitya*) until they are employed by persons and thereby they become "personal" (*pauruṣeya*). The basic principle is that man is not creating words, but only revealing them from their eternal existence to be born in the vocal chords and into the realm of mankind for being used for communication between man and man, and between man and God. God is the source of all words, because it is through the Word that God manifested his creative power and through His Word He abides in every thing manifested as "name and form" (*nāma-rupa*). This point may be more clear in Bhartṛhari's "Grammatics" of Hermeneutics.

Thus Mimāṃsa strongly defends the self-validation of the meaning of the words of the scriptures making the *Sṛuti* (the Vedas) as *śabdapramāṇa*. For "eternal" and "non-personal" words no personal and temporary validation is needed for its meaningfulness. It is enough that we interpret them with reference to their proper contexts.

### 3. Intentionality (*uddeśya*)

The third important principle in Hermeneutics according to Mimāṃsa is the principle of intentionality which will make a sense different from what it is in the *laukika* word. This points to the possibility of having metaphorical or symbolic understanding of certain words used in some particular contexts by way of emphasis, exclamations, surprise, anomaly, exaggerations etc. Such expressions may have only eulogistic or figurative function and meaning. Apart from such occasions



which are to be interpreted again in circumstantial perception about the total context of the text, the Mīmāṃsa school of Indian hermeneutical traditions offers the Biblical hermeneute, who might be struggling for the contextualisation process of his Hermeneutics, a deep sense of the concrete realism of the problem of 'linguisticity' of the people which is structurally conditioned by the cultural symbol system of the tradition. No hermeneute should bypass this broad way to the meaning of the text where feelings, emotions, imaginations, expectations, metaphors, similes, eulogies, frustrations of all kinds, jubilation and exultations of some occasions, of the common people (*lokā*) and their popular expressions (*laukika-vākya*) are the flesh and blood for the Word of God to incarnate. These words have to be understood and interpreted in the same realism as they expressed it for the people of the scriptures. Such a realistic interpretation alone will bridge the gap between the people of the scriptural times (the "forefathers") and the people of our times (the posterity). This should be the ultimate intentionality of the hermeneutical task of a cross-cultural hermeneute.

## II

### The Grammatical Hermeneutics

Bhartṛhari is the illustrious source of this school of Hermeneutics (450-530 AD). In his *Vākyaapadiya* Bhartrhari gives one of the very important principles of Hermeneutics which has got wide acceptance in later schools of Indian traditions and recently also in the Western hermeneutical circles. The principle may be described as follows: *Every word has got only indicative of designative function; no word defines the essence of any object. The ultimate indication of all words is the transcendent Reality, who is God (Brahman) the source of all words.* We may quote a few texts from his *Vākyaapadiya* to substantiate this summary principle:

#### a) *The Essential Nature of God is Word:*

That beginningless and endless One, the imperishable Brahman of which the essential nature is the Word, which manifests itself into objects and from which is the creation of the Universe (VP. I, 1).

b) *Words have only designative function:*

Words only designate objects. It is not possible for words to deal with the essential nature of object (VP. II, 434).

c) *Objects are not known intrinsically but intentionally:*

The same object is described in different ways according to the use to which it is put. Objects are not known in their intrinsic nature, but as they are intended (VP. II, 436).

d) *Words are aids to truths about the objects:*

Words are the sole guide to the truths about the behaviours of objects; and there is no understanding of the truth about words without grammar (VP I, 3).

e) *Word is both revealer and the revealed:*

The power of being the revealer and the revealed, the cause and the effect, externally belongs to the Word-principle which is essentially internal (VP. II, 32).

f) *The inner self of man grasps the meaning:*

The flash of meaning in/by which a sentence-meaning is understood is by no means describable. Having been formed from the function of one's inner self, its nature is not known even to the person (VP. II, 143-4).

There are numerous texts to quote from Bhartṛhari to illustrate his hermeneutical principle which has something of an inner coherence, interiorization, experience, insight which make the interpreter grasp the real meaning of the texts. The technical word used for this inner perception is *sphota*. It is the unitary principle that links the subjective and the objective realms of cognition and enable the interpreter to perceive the sequence or the grammar of words with their things. This sequence has to be intuitively perceived by means of the creative imagination (*pratibha*) of the interpreter. Only if an interpreter has *pratibha* he can perceive the interlinking of one word with another word in a sentence, and one sentence with another in a discourse; this is also true with regard to the linking of word with its object and through the various objects interlinking is possible also with the "Original Word from

which every creation proceeds.” In short it is a sort of *Śabd-ādvaita* that Bhartṛhari is propounding; and this method is holistic which forms the epistemological structure of the Advaita hermeneutics of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya. The real meaning of all words and the real intentionality of all objects, so far their *pratibha* and *spṛha*-linkage with the subject is concerned, are his inner perception of the harmony of this created world which is the world of words, *vā-rāvya* and of meanings (*artha*). According to Bhartṛhari’s holistic view nothing is meaningless in this world of the Word which forms the fabric of every human word. Can a Christian hermeneute appreciate this position and interpret the Gospel in a world full of meanings and ultimately of one Word and One meaning? The interpreter’s task here is to learn the grammar of the real usage, intentionality, sequence, linkage and inter linkage of all words and their objects to the One Word which underlies and supports every human word.

### III

#### The Vedantic Hermeneutics

In the Vedantic traditions the criteriological function of the Word (*śabdapramāṇatva*) and the compatibility of the scientific investigations (*śāstrayonitva*) even on the texts of the Vedas, and the ultimate validity of *anubhava* seem to supply the proper tools of interpretation. When these norms are applied to interpret a scriptural text we may derive the following levels of meanings: a) *padārtha* (literal word meaning), b) *mukhyārtha* (primary meaning or objective meaning), c) *ekārtha* (the one meaning permeating every meaning), d) *tātparya* implied meaning or intentionality.

Even though it is Rāmānuja who articulated these meanings so clearly in his *Vedartha Samgraha*, Śaṅkarācārya the prime mastermind of *advaita vedānta* has in several places of his *Brahma-sūtra Bhāṣya* indications to these meanings. I am not entering into such subtleties of his arguments here. However, I want to make a note here about the point of departure of Śaṅkara from the Mīmāṃsa school of interpreters, precisely because Śaṅkara’s concern was mainly on the understanding of the *jñānakhāṇḍa* section of the *Sruti*. Here the starting point



itself is highly spiritual. A hermeneute cannot be a detached analyser. He requires spiritual dispositions such as the acquisition of the *sādhāṇa-catustaya* (the practice of the fourfold *sādhāṇa* (right means of spiritual realization)).

As foundational to the hermeneutical system of Sri Sankarācārya lies his tripartite world-view which has reserved ultimate and real meaning only to the *paramārthika satta*. The objective world order has only relative value and naturally human words, language, objects of thought (*padārtha*) are all to be subservient to the transcendental experience of the unity-consciousness. A hermeneute far from being a language analyst, or functionalist must be a man experiencing the ultimate Reality (*paramārtha darśana*), and should have attained a certain degree of still-consciousness *sthitaprajñā*). Because *Brahmajijñāsa* is not purely an intellectual analysis of the notions about the supreme Reality. It is at the same time also an explicitation of one's experience of the One Real. It is an entry into the area of the *darśanas* of the Seers (*ṛṣis*) who discovered the relationship between the existent and the non-existent by means of "meditation in their heart". Hence contemplation is a necessary concomitant for experiential hermeneutics. The hermeneute himself should experience what he is going to explain to his readers. And the final purpose of all hermeneutics and inquiries into the meaning of the Word is God-realization (*Brahma sākṣātkāra*), Spiritual Vision (*ātma-darśana*), consciousness of the unity of God and man (*Brahmajīva-aikyabodha*), God-experience (*Brahmānubhava*) and Divine-experience (*Iśwaranubhava*). What could be the ultimate concern of a Christian hermeneute interested in cross-cultural hermeneutics in India? Let the one who is really engaged in such an enterprise find the answer.

# No Pooja but Prema, No Yajna but Iswara Jnana

(An Indian Hermeneutics on the Book of Hosea)

## Why an Indian Hermeneutic?

The Scripture with which the Christians are familiar takes its origin in the Oriental world. It has the taste and colour of the Oriental culture. The thought that runs through its pages reflects the Eastern ethos. The people of ancient West Asia, particularly the people who lived in and imbibed the life style of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia and Greece participated in the Biblical drama. The Akkadian, the Sumerian, the Assyrian, the Babylonian, the Phoenician, the Egyptian, the Persian and the Hellenistic civilisations contributed to the enrichment of the Bible. The faith of Judeo-Christian religions was thus moulded in this complex ancient West Asian Matrix.

The Christian faith, however, due to historical reasons spread to the West and therefore the Biblical hermeneutics was mainly developed in the occident. Although the Eastern Fathers had contributed in this field, that was not adequately recognised in the western religious traditions. The Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions heavily depend on Western hermeneutical methodology. It is not unlikely that the Western Hermeneutics sometimes have not taken seriously or perhaps misunderstood the actual *Sitz im Leben* of this Oriental literature. The Orientals have definitely an advantage over the Westerners in the Biblical hermeneutics because they breathe the cultural air and understand its thought patterns of the Bible.

Often attempts have been made in the West to systematise the theologies of the Bible. To an Oriental mind, this seems to be a futile attempt, for the Biblical writers seldom show evidence of developing a logical, sequential thinking.

Where there is no system as such, how is it possible to systematise the thinking? Could we catch darkness with a net?

To make the Bible intelligent to the people of India, two things have to be done especially by those who are familiar with the Western thought-forms and Western hermeneutical methodology. Firstly, they have to de-occidentise the thought patterns and secondly, they have to begin to interpret the Biblical categories in terms intelligible to the people of this land.

One does not claim that the Indian approach is the Oriental pattern, however, one may humbly submit that, that method is an Oriental approach to an Oriental religious literature. The Bible is to be placed along with *Vedas*, *Gita* and *Puranas*. It is also a companion to the Quran so far as its cultural heritage is concerned. An Indian approach to the Bible, it is hoped, would make the message understood by the people. Moreover, the Bible would be brought back to its original setting along with the other sacred Scriptures of the East.

### **An Indian introduction to the Book of Hosea**

The book of Hosea is one of the prophetic books of the Bible. The Bible was written by people of Western Asia and they took more than one thousand years for its composition. We may consider it as another Veda along with the four Vedas of Arya Dharma. The Aryans, we know, have come from the ancient West Asia. It may be in their home land that this Veda took its early origin. Since the content of the Bible deals with historical realities and through it revelations of God, those who belong to this tradition accept it as *Satya Veda*. The title for the Malayalam Bible is *Satya Veda Pustakam*. It means the book of true Veda. In Hindi the Bible is known as *Dharma Sastra*.

Hosea was one of the prophets of the ancient Israel, a land that is only three hours by air from the borders of India. A prophet is one who speaks on behalf of God. He observes the events that are taking place around him in history. Since he is a person who is in constant communion with God, he is able to interpret the events and their meaning to his contem-



poraries. He understands the will of God for his people in history for he is a member of the divine council (Jer. 23: 18, Amos. 3: 7). We may call him a *Brahmacari*, one who is engaged in the matters pertaining to God. He could hear *Iswara Sabda* in ordinary events because he is attuned to the voice of God. The voice of God is communicated to the contemporaries as *Iswara Vakya* - the word of God. The prophet is not to be understood as a sooth-sayer or a foreteller, he is essentially a forth-teller and his message has contemporary relevance.

Hosea was active in the second part of the 8th century B. C., during the time of Raja Jeroboam ben Joash, king of Israel (Hos. 1: 1). His name suggests *Mukti*. It was a golden period for the people of Israel. However, bureaucracy, nepotism, oppression and corruption in the socio political life, ostentation, hollowness and apostasy in religious life, which is the inevitable consequence of economic well-being erupted without interruption. Amidst this socio-religious background Hosea was leading his *Grhasthaśrama Dharma*. The upheavals of the time spared him not. His wife was being allured by the pleasures of the day. Hosea's family life was disrupted and the children became a prey to their mother's harlotry.

### Hosea's life encounters

Being a *Brahmacari*, he had to walk in the ways of God even in adverse circumstances. *Brahmacari*, in the Bible, is not a life-negating person, but one who affirms the realities of life along with God whose *śabda* he listens to in the world of existence. It is in this world that he walks as a *Brahmacari*. They never shun life and withdraw to the mountains or forests. Since they are in the world of suffering and pain, of rebellion and apostasy, they are qualified to speak on behalf of humanity before God and to speak to people on behalf of God.

His own family became the arena where the prophet had to encounter the reality of life. Should he give up a woman who has forsaken him in favour of her new lovers? - the question was raised in his mind. His wife who ought to be a *pativratha* has now become a harlot in the street. She has become a *mleccha*. How could he continue to love her? Being a

prophet he heard the voice of God', 'Go take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord' (Hos. 1:2, 3:1).

Hosea, the *Brahmacari* realised that God wants to communicate a message to his people through his *Gṛhasthaśrama*. His whole family should become a symbol to the people of Israel (Ch. 1, Isa. 8:18). The will of God to his people is communicated not merely through a direct *śabda* but through an act in history. Here, the family life of Hosea has been used as a media of divine message.

Gomer, the wife of Hosea stood for the disloyal, apostate people of God. Instead of being loyal to Hosea, her husband and lover, she went after other lovers. This is what exactly the people of Israel have done to God their lover. They were once redeemed from the bondage of Egypt and God led them to Canaan and gave them the land as a heritage, loved them and cared for them. Now Israel have gone astray after other gods. Would He love them again?

In the land where the people of Israel settled, there existed a fertility cult and several gods were worshipped by the local people. The new settlers, the Israelites, had a dilemma whether God, the Lord who saved them from the hands of the Egyptians in the historical realm was able to provide them food and other provisions for life. Many of them had fallen before the idols of the land. This struggle in the realm of religion was a struggle between truth and untruth. The true God has jurisdiction over nature and history; but the gods have jurisdiction only in the minds of people. Belief in many gods would naturally restrict the realms of each god and they cannot think of god in universal terms.

On the other hand monotheistic faith inevitably leads to universalism and to the unique authority of God as the creator of Nature. It leads an individual from narrow nationalistic view to a catholic outlook. The people of Israel has become a prey to Baalism, the fertility cult of the land. Their forefathers who have been rescued from Egypt had already vanished from the historical scene and the succeeding genera-

tions have forgotten what the Lord had done to them as a nation. Now they have become introverted and regional in their outlook.

The *A ubhava* which Hosea gained through family life opened his eyes to the attitude of God to the apostate people. God with whom Hosea walks loves the unlovable, the disloyal and the *mleccha* in society. Hosea is asked to love the fallen, immoral and unfaithful woman who left him and the children.

The basic truth behind this domestic experience of Hosea is to show God's attitude to the sinful humanity. Accepting back a rebellious person is quite contrary to the theory of *Karma*. We expect that God would deal with rebellious people with judgement. He loves only those who respond to His love. But the book of Hosea states that the love of God does not depend on human positive response. Even if mankind goes wrong and unfaithful God remains faithful in love. His love seeks after the one who goes astray from Him. The essential nature of God is not anger or destruction but *Prema* the seeking-love. What we find as judgment or punishment is the inevitable consequence of life without God. The one who goes away from God goes into darkness where there is no light. The result is Fall and pain.

### No Iswara Jnana

Hosea's life encounter led to his second discovery of truth, viz. that there is no knowledge of God in the land (Hos. 4:1). Knowledge of God does not mean the lack of God-consciousness. The Hebrew word *yada'* stands for intimate personal relationship. It does not mean intellectual awareness of a truth as a philosophical proposition. It is a personal intimate knowledge that is perpetuated between two individuals in communion. It is a kind of I-Thou relation between God and human person.

The Baalistic cult led the people of Israel to cease to have communion with their God, the saviour. The power and validity of religion are maintained where the people uphold this communion with God, a constant reality. It is through this relation that they understand the will of God. The Bible spoke of this knowledge or *Vid* through a historical event, the Exodus and the consequent covenant which God made with

the people of Israel. When this relation is broken people behave as if they do not know God. That situation leads to swearing, lying, killing, stealing, adultery, house-breaking, murder etc. (Hos. 4 : 2). The corruption and violence in the society indicate the obvious absence of the knowledge of God in the land.

The ostentatious religious observance is no sign of true religion. The number of festivals and *Punya Ksetras* is no indication of divine *Jñāna*, nor the number of atheists an indication of the absence of *Īśwara Jñāna*. The external paraphernalia of religion with its *Pooja* and *Yanja*, with all its colourful performances, are perhaps a way to hide the true reality of religion. During the time of Hosea the ordinary people expressed their religiosity by worshipping the gods of their own choice, a religion in which they could give vent to their carnal desires. This was all due to lack of the knowledge of God.

### What is required?

Prophet's encounter with life made him aware of the true nature of God. God to whom he bore witness did not demand sacrifice nor offerings, but love and knowledge of God (Hos. 6:6). Seeing the miserable conditions of his contemporaries, the prophet called them to come back to God, the Saviour. Coming back to God is repentance. Repentance is no mere sorrow or contrition but a true turning back to God leaving all idols of worship that has hitherto satisfied one's desires. The true God does not require any *Pooja* or *Yanja* or *Prayaścita* but *Prema* and *Īśwara Jñāna*.

The book of Hosea reveals the true nature of God and what He desires from mankind. People should have *Bhakti* to God that would come out as a result of one's *Prema* for God. Those who have such *Bhakti* shall have the *Jnana* of God. Where *Īśwara Prema* and *Jnana* are realised there its reflection will be seen in the socio-religious life of the people.

Hosea points us the way to *Mukti* through his message woven from his *Anubhava*, viz. to return to God with Love and not with *Pooja* or *Yanja* and with the true constant knowledge of God which would result in practical life of the people who believe in God.



# An Indian Understanding of Prophet Amos Today

To read the Bible with an honest mind and a sincere heart brings disquiet; to read the prophets of the Old Testament means facing abrasive persons who with divine power administered shock-treatment to their contemporaries and who continue to do the same as long as the Bible would last as the Word of God. Prophet Amos of Tekoa was a dynamite not only because he was the first of those virulent men known to us as Israel's classical prophets, but also because of the shattering and thunderous tone, tenor and content of his preaching which rocked Israel out of her comfortable and hitherto undisturbed spiritual stupor and self-complacency. Amaziah, the high priest of Bethel, was correct when he reported to King Jeroboam II concerning Amos's preaching: "The land is not able to bear all his words." (Am 7:10).

The divine verdict that Amos pronounced upon Israel was a devastating *No* to all her traditions and institutions. He was the man of the eleventh hour, not persuading the people to reform and repentance but thundering out imminent and total destruction. He was not a conciliatory preacher, but a man of harsh opposition, of embittered protest and a forerunner of irretrievable collapse. Was he a man of doom or a man of hope? An answer can be given only from a correct comprehension of his prophetic identity and of the religious attitudes and illusions of eighth century Israel. Amos is to be understood as a prophet and not as a politician or a retreat-preacher. As such, the unsparing and inescapable divine punishment announced by him was, from the perspective of the God in whose name and under whose power he preached, first and foremost the triumph of a just God who never allows his people to lead him by the nose. From the perspective of Israel, which basked in cultic glory and past traditions and thereby choked and smothered her ethical life, the death-knell sent by Amos did not forebode Israel's funeral but was meant for startling her from out of the grave she buried herself in.

Amos is a contemporary to any people or church that is morally dead. A nation that builds itself upon corruption and exploitation, a church that builds façades of hypocrisy and individuals who swim along with the current seeking religion in conformism would find in Amos but words of death. Amaziah tried to disarm Amos by taking him for a conspirator seeking the overthrow of the nation and a professional prophet slaving for his daily bread. The present generation may disarm prophets by branding them as agents and paid reactionaries seeking money and gain for themselves by subverting the *status quo*. The present church may try to allot to the prophets of today peaceful themes for preaching and harmless places for activity. She may even try to allure the Amoses today into her own ranks by holding out to them ecclesiastical honours and prebends. A clerical church may sneer at the Amoses of today just as the high priest of Bethel sneered and snarled at Amos the lay man who did not have higher studies or canonical mission. It would do good to the hierarchical church if she recalls to mind that a clerically bureaucratic church has often salvifically been chastened by God through the laity. More frightening for her to reflect upon is the fact that the shattering words of Amos were more addressed to religion than to society. True, Israel did not know any separation between religion and state, but state and religion did not form an amalgam either. Amos, and later on Jesus of Nazareth, confronted their respective societies as a divinely covenanted people who betrayed their God!

### Israel and India

Israel of eighth century B. C. and India of twentieth century A. D. have many striking parallels and similarities. During the long and relatively peaceful reign of King Jeroboam II (787/6 - 747/6 B. C.) Israel achieved great economic prosperity. Business and deceitful practices flourished (Am 8:5). Display of wealth was exercised in building large, richly furnished houses (3:10; 3:15; 5:11; 6:4; 8), in cultivating exquisite vines (5:11; 6:4), in indulging in voluptuous feastings (4:1; 6:4, 6.) and exuberant temple festivals (4:5; 5:21ff.). Economic development brought about social inequalities and crimes of injustice. The poor were exploited by the cleverer businessmen

and money-lenders. Slavery for debt was practised even in inhuman ways (2:6;8:6). Intimidation of witnesses and bribery of judges resulted in widespread perversions in the judiciary (5:10,12). Cult reaped rich advantages from the economic prosperity. Sacrifices and offerings were prolific (4:4-5; 5:21-22). But cult was divorced from goodness in social life. People went to the holy places, practised sacred rites, but did not care for justice and righteousness in life.

The Indian parallel is too striking to go unnoticed. Economic progress achieved by post-independent India has helped a tiny minority of some 8% or so to roll in the comforts and amenities of modern living. This minority is aggrandizing itself with the help of structures that legalize social injustice and political exploitation. Analysis and assessment of the Indian social and political phenomena would not, however, be the job of an Indian Amos. He would rather unmask the more covert religious or ecclesiastical pelf. Christians are a minority in India like the Jews in the ancient Orient. The founder of Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth, is held in great esteem and adoration even by the non-Christian Indians. What wins Jesus universal veneration in India is his heroic death as the crown and culmination of a life-style and preaching, witnessing his solidarity and sympathy with humans suffering from sin, religious discrimination and social marginalization.

The scandal and squalor in the Indian church stand in inverse proportion to the wide-spread appreciation of her founder. The more people know, appreciate, admire and adore Jesus the more they get impelled to hate present day Christianity. The founders and builders of modern India did not preach hatred either towards the West or towards the Christian religion of the West. If the Indian church laments that it is her western garb that makes her unacceptable to India, she is either consciously or unconsciously, trying to evade an uncomfortable truth, that the self-emptying spirit of Jesus is replaced in the church by the lust for self aggrandizement. In the pre independent era it manifested itself in political and religious colonialism; in the after independent era it manifests itself in a number of shrewd and subtle ways. After losing

the political support from the colonial powers, the church geared herself into hectic efforts to strengthen her position as far as finance and personnel were concerned. Today she is a social, political and economic force to be reckoned with. With the avidity and craftiness of any political party, the church evolved strategies, issued statements and embarked on activities with a view to make the nation believe that she too is interested in building up the future of the country. But the church wants, to build up her own present and future. In order to ingratiate herself with the powers that be, the church follows policies that are not inspired by the radical and uncompromising spirit of the Gospel of Jesus, but are dictated by political opportunism. As people get more and more aware of the criminal injustice built into our social and political systems and structures, the church tries to save her face and to dupe thinking people by making big statements which mostly remain in the archives. It is a strange and perplexing truth that the church is at times pressed into displays of Christian courage by leftist and atheistic forces. Relief activities, social work, educational apostolate and even the few stray attempts at conscientization are often a means for getting vain glory and foreign help. Even heroic practices of poverty and daring involvements in liberation struggles are sometimes paraded and proclaimed for attracting praise and money.

In India the church remains a foreign body, due not so much to her external garb as to her colonial imperialistic outlook, and, particularly, to her cringing dependence on the West for money and mandates. Even in specifically local issues the Indian church authorities do not have either the courage or the vision to form their own policies for the good of the nation. Senseless dependence on the West is adhered to for safeguarding and strengthening her financial status. This servility in thought and action has paid well; for the officials of the church belong to the aristocratic class in this country. Money and influence of the church are needed by powerful socio political and financial lobbies in this country and hence they too contribute towards maintaining the socio-political and economic power of the Church.



The over-all image projected by the church in India is that of an organized sect, sick with a minority-complex, greedy for money and cheap popularity, allying and compromising with all changing trends and fashions, financially self-supporting, but devoid of the honest and courageous commitment of Jesus Christ.

### Amos on Israel's social life

The vehement and virulent demand of Amos was for justice and righteousness. The twin concept is comprehensive of all that is needed for an ideal society. By justice the prophet meant correct, impartial legal transactions at the courts of law. Righteousness is more a quality of the society than of the individual. It denotes a society's commitment to redressing social grievances and the consequently realized social condition in which individuals live with a sense of security from their conviction that nobody can harm them with impunity.<sup>1</sup> Amos, did not demand a cultic society offering prayers and sacrifices to God; nay he condemned the contemporary cultic and piety-laden society as criminal and opposed to it a society in which justice should roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5:24). If water signifies life, the image of an ever-flowing or never drying stream conveys the ideal of a God pleasing society whose life is vibrant not in cult but in the practice of justice and righteousness.

The great crime committed by Israel consisted in turning justice to wormwood and in casting down righteousness to the earth (5:7). Justice and righteousness are supposed to be the springs of life and happiness. To turn them to bitter wormwood means to convert the sweetness of life into bitterness. To cast them down to the earth, as one casts down a dead animal, would mean to convert life into death. It is further pictured as grossest stupidity when Amos compares this radical perversion of justice with men using war-horses on rocky hills instead of using them on plane terrain as any normal wise man would do, or with men using oxen to plough the sea instead of using them to plough fields (6:12). Both these images forcefully convey to us the magnitude and unpardonability of the stupid crime that was being committed in Israel. The foolishness and perversity of the actions pic-

tured in the images are too evident to escape the understanding of any ordinary, even uneducated, person. That Israel lives at peace with such a state of affairs without seeing the impropriety of or feeling any compunction for it, points to the degree of spiritual insensibility she sank into, caused both by familiarity with the evil and by lack of moral guidance. This points further to the fact, that those responsible for religious instruction and moral guidance were busy with feasting and fastings, letting the nation's moral sense come to total bluntness. As cult became the *raison d'être* of religion, social crimes got either ignored or accepted as unavoidable ingredients in any society. A prophet is not a man of compromise; he would call a spade a spade, even if it is found not only among garden tools, but even in palaces and sanctuaries.

Prophet Amos did not like theologizing or giving new moral principles; as the conscience of the nation he rather laid his finger on the wounds of the soul. Instances of rampant injustice are laid bare by him. Judges take bribes, favour the rich and browbeat the oppressed poor at the courts of law (5:12). Judges who pronounce judgements according to the correct norms of jurisprudence, and witnesses who embolden themselves to speak out the truth in favour of the poor, incur the hatred of the rich and the influential (5:10). Since justice was thus on sale to the highest bidder, the rich could tread upon the heads of the poor with impunity (2:7), take exorbitant exactions of wheat from the poor tenants and build for themselves luxurious houses and pleasant vineyards (5:11). Humans were bought and sold as slaves even for a small pittance like a pair of shoes (2:6; 8:6) to satisfy the ever insatiable greed of the rich. Taking advantage of the loop holes in the existing laws of morality and misusing parental authority, men abuse maidens (2:7). Garments taken in pledge are not returned at night fall and so the poor, who were forced by dire needs to give even their garments in pledge, are made to suffer and perhaps even to die in chilly, freezing nights. Money obtained through fining is used for wine-drinking, instead of using it for making good the harm and damage suffered by the victims of such finable misdeeds (2:8). The cheapest, easiest and commonest way to make money was to do business with worthless merchandise using false measures

and balances. Amos speaks of the greedy merchants who are impatiently waiting for the Sabbath and New Moon to be over - two of the days on which business was forbidden - so that they can continue selling useless wheat with false measures and balances (8:5).

Like Jesus, who contrasts the life of the rich man with that of Lazarus (Lk 16:19ff), Amos paints the cushy life of the opulent classes against the poverty of the exploited. He mentions the summer and winter villas of the rich with their costly exotic ivory decorations (3:15). He speaks of the couches and beds with luxurious upholstery. More important than edifices and furniture is the behaviour of the nobility. They stretch themselves in a vulgar way upon their couches and beds because they are intoxicated and so have lost all sense of sobriety and decency (6:4). The rich matrons of Samaria, excessively fat due to idle life and over eating, are called by Amos "cows of Bashan". Their constant demand for wine compels their husbands - who with all their signorie were in reality but pitiable henpecks - to take from the tenants ever larger exactions of wine and thus to crush and oppress them (4:1). The men themselves outdo their women by gulping down large quantities of wine, not from wine-glasses, but from bowls (6:6). Wine-drinking and wine-cultivation are underlined by Amos (2:8; 4:1; 6:6; 5:11) as evident signs of unbridled mirth. The daily menu of the rich offers them delicacies prepared from fine lambs and fattened young calves (6:4). Their wantonness is enhanced by music, for which new musical instruments are invented (6:5). Exquisitely perfumed oil is used to anoint their heads (6:6). Such excesses make them "respectable" (notable men - 6:1) in the sick society in which money and power controlled everything.

Amos exploded into this society like a volcano and announced imminent end to their revelries (6:7). The leading men at the capital in Samaria are cursed for their carefree continuance in and acquiescence with the sinful present (6:1) and for thinking that the day of divine chastisement would be long in coming (6:3). No wonder then, that Amos was denounced as a disturber and conspirator, shattering the land, shocking the people and bringing panic into a peaceful situation (7:10).

## Amos and Indian Society

The book of Amos, the words which God spoke through Amos, are in the canon of the Bible for the salvation and castigation of the church. Will the Indian church open her eyes, see the situation and say her *mea culpa* on reading Amos? India is a country, where all the evils of capitalism thrive amidst slogans and camouflage of socialism. The church, interested as she is ultimately only in her own advantages, is constantly making efforts to win the favour of the existing systems and powers rather than embolden herself to fight against them. She not only does not throw in her lot with the struggling classes, but looks upon sincerely committed Christians with suspicion because she fears trouble for her if her people are to fight against national injustice. She cautions her slavishly docile adherents and stifles the spirit and activities of her bolder members by proposing to them the picture of a meek and sweet Jesus preaching a convenient type of non-violence. The Bible is used by the church, not for getting inspired by it, but for straining out of it ideas and arguments to serve her vested interests.

There is perversion of justice in India. Instead of righteousness, a sense of frustration permeates the society. The poor and the powerless are sure that justice would not be done to them from the courts of law. The brutality and greed of the police, the favouritism and partiality in all the branches of civil service, corruption and black money as the sure, secure and successful means for making fortunes, bring about mistrust, disdain and contempt towards the honesty and efficacy of the country's organs and offices of public life. The needs of the poor find a place only in slogans and programmes, while, in actual fact, the needs of the rich are catered to. Among those blessed ones, who enjoy the favours of the rich, who are respected in public places, who need not tarry long in queues or in waiting lists and who are among the first beneficiaries as far as public supply of essentials is concerned, are the big bodies in the church.

Covertly legalized terrorism using police and politics frighten away judges and lawyers from conscientiously exercis-



ing their duties. People are afraid of going to court either for getting their grievances redressed or for testifying to the truth of oppression by the powerful, because the power that comes from money and party politics can make saints out of felons and criminals out of the helplessly poor. Money got by means of exorbitant interests, bribes, pressurization of the commoners, pseudocharities and a thousand and one clever ways bring palatial buildings and extensive estates to the contrivers. People are not sold into slavery in India, but bonded labour, child labour and underpaid labour make the lot of the poor more miserable than that of slaves. Atrocities against the Harijans, utilizing them for menial works, discriminating them in society, church and sanctuary, and all these not only with impunity, but also at times on the basis of some principles of pseudo-piety, form the order of the day in India. Veto to family planning, vitriolic attack on adultery, premarital sex, abortion and divorce, zealous campaign against drinking and many other virtuous and vicious admonitions and taboos find their victims in the poor; the rich and the holy can always circumvent the same laws with condonement, concealment, connivance and even with positive assistance from the crooks and fakes who manage and manoeuvre from high places. Adulteration of food, frauds and cheats in business, commercialisation of Sundays and feasts, misuse of pastoral letters, pulpits and confessionals, trade with Mass stipends, production and sale of sanctity, charisms and prayers and many other money oriented and prestige covetous practices and undertakings make the Indian situation more abominable than the religious plight of Israel during the time of Amos. It also brings out the sad fact, that unlike in the Israel of eighth century B. C., where there was no avowed separation between church and state and consequently no two mutually independent levels on which sins were committed, in the India of today, church and state, proclaiming mutual independence, are involved in an apparent mutual emulation as far as the multiplicity of crimes is concerned. We do not find a church which works as a leaven in the state, but a church which is influenced by the state in addition to the influence she receives from the western church bureaucracy. In this present unholy condition the church is worried with the worries of the rich, but she is in the least worried about her own spiritual and

religious disintegration; nay she expends much money and ink to persuade herself, her adherents and her enemies that she is unjustly attacked by the Amoses of today.

If at the long last the church is to open her eyes, if she is clear sighted and sincere-minded, she will find to her shame and alarm that she has no moral right whatever at all to harangue or exhort the world to order, because her own house is in disorder. At present the church is not silent; she is vociferous on many burning issues of social justice. But what she speaks so loudly that what she speaks carries no weight. She pleads for just wages, but her own domestic servants do not get it; she asks for freedom of speech, freedom of opinion and even for freedom of religion and conscience, but in her own household all these forms of freedom are denied. She proclaims from pulpits values like simplicity frugality, self-less service and many other lofty, sublime and inspiring ideas and ideals of life, but her own officials are at times personifications of luxury and authoritarianism, basking in vain glory and promoting and demanding personal cult! The church of today belabours under the heavy weight of discrepancy between her preaching and her life. If this credibility gap is to be bridged, she has to subject herself to the salutary judgement of God. Only from the crucible of God can she hope to return to her God-willed identity and mission. God's crucible and God's judgement are brought to the church by the prophetic words of the Amoses of today!

### **Amos against the Cult in Israel**

It is the instinct of the self-complacent wicked to pounce upon the prophets with defensive arguments. When Amos announced to Israel imminent catastrophe, they held out to him their flourishing cult and their unique covenant-bond with Yahweh as sure guarantees against fall. Amos was thus faced with the task of undermining the stupid self-security of their faith. He did that by unmasking the criminality of their cult and the hollowness of their claim of superiority over the other peoples!

Playing the role of a priest, Amos hurls sarcasms at the cultic practices and pilgrimages of Israel (4:4-5). He tells them that their cultic practices are in real truth but transgressions because Israel seeks in cult ultimately self-complacency, merry-making and self-glorification. In another text Amos, standing in the midst of feasting crowds, passes the severest and most scathing of divine verdicts upon the cult of Israel (5:21-27). God hates Israel's feasts, offerings, sacrifices, music and devotions because they serve, not God, but the cravings of men for money-bringing business, cultic rivalries with other sanctuaries and for pleasing themselves with the thought that they do great things for God. Amos says, it is not God who needs service from the people, but it is the people who ought to be replenished with the gifts and goodness of the Lord they worship, so that they, like their God, be zealous champions of justice and righteousness. If people shirk their obligations of justice in social life, throng the sanctuaries with ample offerings and come away with the illusion that they have catered to the needs and interests of God, are they not serving themselves under the pretext of serving God? Are they not making God a greedy Lord coveting gifts from people, fond of music, money and cultic extravagance? Would not such a God be a God who appeases the conscience of unjust worshippers by taking cultic bribes from them? Has anyone ever torn down the mask of churchgoers and pilgrims as mercilessly as Amos has done? Cult can degenerate itself into trade with God. The rich who have money for feasts and sacrifices, time for mouthing out prayers, and social influence for attracting praises from the clergy, would consequently get the self illusion and clerical endorsement that they are the ones pleasing to God. This would be tantamount to the blasphemy of incapacitating the poor for favours from God. Amos, who believes in Yahweh the liberator of slaves and the protector of the oppressed, could not resist the power of God that impelled him to demolish this radical perversion of the meaning of divine worship. In Israel cult became the profession of priests, a source of income for the temple staff and a rite for infallibly procuring blessings from God. God is thus made to serve the people, who feed and handle him. Amos does not give us a treatise on cult, but attacks it with unparalleled vigour and

fire, that we are forcefully awakened to the grim gravity of Israel's cultic perfidy.

People who are given over to such a cult cannot return to their senses except by totally and uncompromisingly severing themselves from cult and sanctuaries. Only then can they place themselves in a situation where it may become possible for them to seek the real God, who is a God, not of cult, but of justice and righteousness. Turning their backs to cult is the necessary precondition and indispensable pre-requisite for seeking God, who is the source of life. As long as cult helps the wicked to self-complacency, it blocks them from examining their social life, finding out their sins, repenting of them and then turning back to God through doing good. In the contemporary social situation of Amos, doing good meant establishing justice in the gates, where justice was being distorted. Amos had the holy boldness to call cult evil that leads people away from God and from good life. The imperative: "seek God that you may live" is antithetically balanced and corroborated by the other imperative: "Do not seek Bethel, do not enter into Gilgal" (5:4-5). It is nothing more and nothing less than saying: stop going to church, so that you may seek God, the fountain of life; for Bethel and Gilgal, two venerable sanctuaries of Israel, stand for Israel's cultic establishment. If seeking God negatively meant putting a stop to church-going, positively it meant doing good by establishing justice in the gate (5:14-15). God is to be sought, life for God's people is to be found, only by working for justice. If the church makes of God a cultic chimera, then the true God is to be found, not in the church, but in the market place, slums and suburban areas!

Cult in Israel was an evil more serious than mockery of God because it replaced the true God of justice with a cultic God, for the gain and solace of the wicked rich and the pious priests. This criminal cult - murder of the true God and worship of the man-made God - would give Israel no asylum in the face of calamity; nay, it would bring upon her the avenging wrath of God. In this vein Amos speaks of Yahweh cutting down the horns of the altar (3:14) and Yahweh standing beside the altar and commanding the cataclysm of shattering



down the cultic establishment upon the heads of the people, from which none will escape (9:1-4). God will destroy the people who worship him with ritual perfection and cultic generosity because they substituted the ethical God with a cultic God, good life with cultic life, the odour of charity with the smoke of incense and conveniently forgot to do good to the needy. Has the church of today ears to hear this word of God?

### **Judgement on Israel's religious superiority**

No dogma of faith was so frequently recited in Israel as the dogma of Exodus: Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt. This dogma confessed not only liberation from slavery but also God's election of Israel from all other peoples. Amos questions the understanding of this dogma. He puts the salvation history of Israel on a par with the histories of the Philistines and of the Syrians (9:7), the arch enemies of Israel. The latter came from Kir of Mesopotamia and the former from Crete of the Mediterranean sea. Their history and migrations were under the providential working of God as was the way of Israel from Egypt to Palestine. Amos thus gives a big dig to the election-consciousness of Israel. God is the Lord of all; but when God helped Israel against the Egyptians and later on against the Amorites (2:9), Israel misunderstood it as God's enmity towards the foreign peoples and his unconditional and irrevocable stand for Israel. Amos puts forward the common sense truth and fact: Yahweh is the Lord, Liberator and Judge of all peoples. This truth is further sharpened to Israel's painful humiliation by comparing them not only with the socially and militarily superior Philistines and Syrians, but also with the abject, black and marginalized Aethiopians (9:7).

In his oracles against the nations (1:3 - 2:3) Amos puts Israel in the list of pagan nations deserving divine punishment; nay, the oracle against Israel builds the climax of these oracles, thus putting Israel as the one more severely condemned than the others. The oracle against Israel is more developed both extensively and intensively: while in the case of foreign nations one sin is mentioned, in the case of Israel the number of sins rises to the maximum demanded by the bigger

of the consecutive numbers, namely, to four. Further, unlike the case of the foreign nations, the life of Israel, scarred, marred and torn by social crimes, is set against what she received from Yahweh. Yahweh saved her from the mighty Amorites (2:9) and by doing so he revealed to them his nature and preferential quality as the champion of the underdog. Instead of living after this example of Yahweh their God by taking care of the poor, Israel became a people whose hall-mark came to be oppression of the weaker classes.

With a scandalously bold and unprecedented turn, Amos invites the pagans to come and bear witness before Yahweh against the ill-gotten wealth hoarded up by Israel in her strongholds through violence and robbery (3:9). Israel has no right to sit in judgement over the pagans. Here the tables are drastically and dramatically turned so as to make the pagans Yahweh's helpers in the trial of Israel.

If Yahweh is the Lord and God of all, if he makes no difference between the various peoples of the earth, what, in the teachings of Amos, would be the religiously specific relationship between Yahweh and Israel? Of all the peoples of the earth, Israel alone is "known" to God (3:2). The word "to know" conveys the idea of election which, however, is not a privilege or honour, but a mission given to the chosen ones. Israel was chosen by God, out of love, for being the sacrament of God in this world by championing the cause of the poor. Since Israel has failed in this mission, God will punish her for all her iniquities (3:2).

### **Pride and cult in the Indian Church**

The church in India is puffed up with an air of superiority over her European sister churches and over the non-Christian religions in India. She boasts of her better Christian life in comparison with the churches abroad. Indian Christians recite many prayers, they frequent Sunday Mass and sacraments, their family life is good because it is old, they have vocations even for export, their priests in general are loyal, their theologians do not produce as many heresies as do their western counterparts, their hierarchy is faithful

to Rome, their traditions are ancient and hallowed, they have made themselves a socio-religious force in this country despite their minority status, they have Mother Teresa of Calcutta, they can boast of Mahatma Gandhi as a great anonymous Christian and they can speak and write so many good things about themselves and their church. A Jeremiah should come to tell the Indian Christians that they, and not their western counterparts, are the bad figs shown to the prophet by Yahweh (Jer:24).

If the religiousness of a people is to be measured not so much by their practices of piety as by the goodness of their life, then the Christians in the West are superior to the Indian Christians. The enormous sums of money pumped by those Christians to the poorer countries of the world, the ideological leadership they have been giving for better and more relevant Christian realization, their protests and conscientization against the colonialistic politics of their own countries and, above all, their stand and status in religion independently of financial ties from above command respect and esteem. On the contrary, lust for foreign money drives many Indian ecclesiastics even to dishonest and false fund-raising campaigns; substantial lumps of such easily-gotten money are spent for unchristian pomps; loyalty to Rome and over-enthusiastic hospitality towards and friendship with the western churches are prompted by financial considerations from the part of the Indian church; absence of heresies in India points more to poor or little theological thinking than to zeal or concern for orthodoxy; loyalty of the laity and the clergy to the hierarchy is mainly due to financial dependence on the bishops who exercise the tyranny of money in their churches; abundant vocations are mostly due to social backwardness; displays of cultic piety make the Indian Christianity resemble the Israel of Amos's days. The numerous institutions run by the Indian church are signs of western Christian charity and are monuments proclaiming the Indian church's craze for money, big buildings and religious ostentation. Reports of various scandals in Christian charitable and educational institutions prove the absence in them of christian chivalry, not to speak of Christian service and charity.

The decadence of religion in the West or the abundance of superstitions in the Indian non christian religions is not the yard-stick to determine the integrity of the Indian Christian church. As Israel gloried in the God of Exodus, so the Christians glory in Jesus Christ. The church is Christian only to the extent she is imbued with the spirit of Christ. Like Yahweh of the Old Testament, Jesus of Nazareth opted for the poor and the discriminated. The church in India, aristocratic in wealth and bureaucratic in administration, lives and moves with the richer classes. Her attitude and her charities towards the poor are like those of a benefactor and not patterned after the self-emptying example of Jesus who became a slave in order to save the enslaved ones. Identification with the poor is the touchstone of every genuine Christian apostolate. In the Indian church mission it is conspicuous by its absence and by the reign of its opposite. Preaching the Gospel to the poor is a source of income for the church rather than a means for her to walk in the foot-steps of Jesus. Money flows into the treasuries of the Indian bishops because there are poor people in this country. If poverty is eradicated from India, the church would be losing her main source of income. Seen thus, the wealth of the church makes her more reprehensible and criminal than the rich man in the Gospel of Luke (16:19 ff), for Lazarus was not a source of income for the rich man. The church therefore has no right to glory in Jesus.

Amos called the pagans to witness against Israel before Yahweh concerning the riches of Israel. Has the church in India the courage to submit her finances to inspection by upright Christians, not to speak of upright non-Christians? The church of Jesus should have her moorings in the mercy of God, not in foresightedly amassed money. Money plentifully collected, wilfully transacted and secretly kept from the knowledge of the public is what makes the church less and less credible to the people. The God of the Bible and Jesus of the Gospels would have been accepted by many more millions in this country, if the church had returned to its sources.

Amos gave Israel a place in the list of the sinful nations. It is high time that the Indian church came out from



the shell of her particularism and superiority complex and inserted herself into the ranks of sinners to bring about a human community of reconciled and integrated people. Even in this post-Vatican age of religious fellowship, the church asserts herself as the light of the nations and fulfiller of all that is good and noble in other religions. The patriotism of Gandhi, the endurance of the Hindu soul, the tolerance of the Hindu culture, the vision of the Marxists, the heroism of the Naxalites and other values and virtues outside the realm of Christianity should have opened the eyes of the church to her own faithlessness and spirit-lessness. Israel stood for the blessing of all peoples (Gen. 12:3). Jesus Christ fulfilled this mission (Gal 3) and expects the church to carry on that mission till the end of the world. The church can become a blessing for all only if she is to become the kenotic church of Jesus the Servant without playing Mother and Mistress over others in virtue of her financial and theological resources and capabilities.

Amos criticised cult precisely because it became an end in itself. He condemned because it failed to transform social life. Worship today is no more for community-building as was the case in pre-monarchical Israel and in the early church. The God to whom Masses are offered, hymns are sung and money is given, is the exact parallel of the cultic God unmasked by Amos. A cultic church which blocks courageous commitment to change the world, a church which basks in liturgical pageantry, a church whose liturgical diversities promote dissensions and rivalries, a church with abundant commercial devotions, functions and feasts, a church highly sensitive to liturgical rites and least bothered about human rights - this church stands more severely condemned by Amos than the Israel of old, because outrages in the name and under the canopy of cult are more horrible and manifold in this Indian church of today than in the Israel of 760 B. C., the year around which Amos began his prophetic ministry.

Will the Indian church finally realize that she stands condemned by God for limiting Christian life to the premises of the church? As a pilgrim church she has to seek and train her members to seek God, not in cult, not in

dividualistic immanence, but in the struggle for a just society. This struggle is already taking place. God will save his struggling people. But the church has to answer to herself and to her God whether she is to play her role in this ongoing struggle. For the just society of tomorrow, the church does not have blue-prints in her dusty archives. It is the word of God that shakes the present and shapes the future. Is the church prepared to be led by this prophetic word of God, or does she cling to her tried norms of administration, jurisprudence and diplomacy? "The lion has roared, who will not fear? The Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy?" (3:8). The Lord roars today in India. Will the church prophesy?

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#### Please note

1. The Bible quotations and references in this article are taken from the RSV Catholic edition.

2. Indebtedness to the two books of Hans Walter Wolf: (1) *Joel and Amos*. Fortress Press Philadelphia, 1977 and (2) *Die Stunde des Amos*. Kaiser Verlag Munchen, 1979, is hereby acknowledged.

# The Letter to the Romans and Its Message for Our Times

## I

### Introduction

‘Salvation’ understood with its rich theological meaning is the concern of all religions. In the Indian context it is equally so whether we understand salvation as *Mokṣa*, *Mukti* or *Nirvāṇa*. What is perhaps characteristic of today’s understanding of salvation is its comprehensive meaning; its this-worldly as well as other-worldly meanings; its spiritual and material meanings, in one word, its human meaning. The same religious scriptures which were once made use of for a truncated and partial meaning of basic religious concepts are said to be loudly promoting this comprehensive, human meaning in our times. It is true of Bible also. In fact, the Bible has turned out to be the strongest defender of a realistic concept of human life and human destiny.

The purpose of this study is to rediscover this integral vision of life as presented by Paul in his letter to the Romans. In fact, Paul is the first and the best New Testament theologian who in the middle of the first century of the Christian era reflected on the meaning of christian life against the background of the Christ event. His theological reflection was an ongoing one and his writings, known as “letters” and “epistles” are the sources from which we can gather the richness of his theology. It is true that Pauline writings were very often occasioned by the particular context of a church and its discipline; at the same time Paul made use of such occasions to give expression to his theological insight to educate his readers. It is, therefore, absolutely irrelevant to keep on distinguishing the classical distinction proposed by Adolf Deissmann about *letter* and *epistle*, the former as private, spontaneous, non literary and the latter as an artistic literary

form intended for publicity. Pauline writings are neither letters nor epistles. They are both. Paul made use of a private particular context to articulate his theological mind which he meant not only for that particular community, but for every believing person and community.

At the same time, it is equally true that Paul did not write encyclicals, even if encyclicals have got abiding values transcending time and culture. Paul was limited by his own culture and time and we have to be fully aware of it. We shall come to see some of these points later in this study. The Bible as the Word of God in words of men is a complex reality which needs continuous attention and discerning power on the part of exegetes and biblical theologians. The two aspects of God's Word and men's words are so inextricably united that we need to be sufficiently open-minded and faith-oriented to distinguish the one from the other. Allowing for this divine and human factors in the Bible, we can legitimately analyse any biblical book or passage and establish the abiding value of it and then interpret it within the context of the culture of a particular people.

Paul enjoyed a unique position in the early church as a great theologian. The author of Second Letter of Peter writes: "Paul, our beloved brother, wrote to you in the Spirit of wisdom that is his, dealing with these matters as he does in all his letters. There are certain passages in them hard to understand. The ignorant and the unstable distort them, just as they do the rest of Scripture, to their own ruin." (2 Pt 3:15-16) It is also worth noting that at the time this letter was written, the writings of Paul were recognised as having the same quality and authority as the books of the Old Testament. It only proves that Paul is the greatest theologian of the early church, who more than anybody else articulated his religious experience in terms and symbols which were at his disposal.

Among all Pauline writings, the Letter to the Romans occupies a pride of place as Paul's most characteristic writing. Karl Barth in the beginning of this century wrote: "We can never exhaust the meaning of the letter to the Romans." St. Augustine looked back to this letter as the starting-point



and inspiration of his conversion (cf. Rom 13:11-14). E. Brunner understands this letter as the "Chapter of destiny of the Christian Church". Centuries ago Martin Luther characterized this letter as "rightly the chief part of the New Testament and the clearest gospel of all" and he added that it would be well worth memorizing, so that a christian could recite it by rote, word for word. He personally owed very much to this letter; and he found in it the highest support for the position upon which his work as Reformer rested. It was thus natural that he should see in it the chief part of the New Testament and the clearest gospel of all.

The letter to the Romans is the first and the longest in the collection of the New Testament coming under the name of 'letters' or 'epistles'. But chronologically it comes much later, probably towards the end of his third missionary journey, sometime near 57 A. D. In addition, it is a letter which Paul wrote to a community which he did not found. Christians in Rome seem to have become numerous first among the Jewish population of the city. The Roman historian Suetonius mentions an edict of the Emperor Claudius (died c. 49 A.D.) ordering the expulsion of Jews from Rome in connection with a certain "Chrestus", probably an error for "Christus". Aquila and Priscilla (Prisca) were affected by this edict (Acts 18:2). It is the opinion of scholars that christian faith came to that city through members of the Jewish community of Jerusalem who were christian converts.

Why should Paul write a letter to this community? It was Paul's policy not to preach in places where Christ's name was already known, for he did not want to build on a foundation laid by another (15:20). All the same, Paul wanted to come into close contact with the Roman Congregation. He was aware of the strategic importance of this Congregation at the cross roads of the world's traffic. In fact, he was longing to visit this community for a long time (1:8-15). Now that he was planning to go to Spain (15:22-29), Paul wanted to have a close acquaintance with the Roman Community, and it is possible that he thought of Rome as a base for his projected missionary work in Spain and around, as Antioch was for his earlier work. He was also informed about the Roman com-

munity (13:1-7; 14:1-11), perhaps by Aquila and Prisca, and it may be assumed that he in turn was known to the christians there. It would be difficult to explain why he should have written this lengthy letter to them unless they were aware of his apostolic role and his whole remarkable history, and would receive his reflections with corresponding interest.

What do we have in this letter as unique? What is it that makes the study of this letter meaningful and relevant today? It is said about Père Legrange that after he was forbidden to teach the Old Testament he started teaching the New Testament and especially the letter to the Romans. He wrote a commentary on the same. But he confessed that if he had known the problems involved in it, he would not have ventured on this. In fact, the letter to the Romans was a 'dangerous' one for any Catholic exegete to start teaching or writing on. The problem is that anyone studying it closely and without bias will gradually come to realize the provoking nature of this letter. Even the pioneer work of Hans Küng on "Justification" (195) was basically built on the theology of this letter. One could even say that it is an ecumenical letter, a letter transcending the barriers of religions, not to speak of the barriers of denominations.

The letter to the Romans is an exploration into the depth and dimensions of anthropology. Paul analyses the reality of man in his totality, especially as he is in himself and also as related to God. As an apostle who had come into contact with a variety of people and their basic problems, Paul was in a position to understand the deep roots of human psychology. Moreover, as a convinced and committed Jew, he had been familiar with the basic quest of this religion to make man authentic. Paul had the quest always before him: How is man related to God and how is God related to man? The major challenges he faced in his apostolic career, especially the Judaizing, the Greek and the Gnostic challenges, forced Paul to analyse the various aspects of God-man relationship. It is this radical anthropology that Paul is presenting in the letter to the Romans. At the same time, it is to be noted that Pauline anthropology is basically Pauline christology. It is

only within the context of the Christ event that Paul analyses the reality of man.

For Paul, Jesus had either no importance or all importance. He persecuted the Christians with the full conviction that Jesus had no importance and that therefore his followers have no right to continue as a community. But his encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus made him realize that Jesus is risen from the dead and that he is one with his believers, so much so that persecuting Christians means persecuting Jesus (Acts 9:5). If this Jesus is risen and is so much identified with his followers, Paul concluded, he must be all important and his teaching must be relevant. Paul refers to the crucial moment of this new conviction in very clear terms in his letter to the Philippians (Phil 3:5-14). He realized that the main objective of Jesus' mission was to make human beings authentic and integrated. With all his efforts to achieve that perfection and maturity, he could not succeed. It is precisely at this juncture that he encountered the risen Lord, with his new vision of life and his new challenge about life.

## II

### The challenge of a new righteousness

The challenge posed by Jesus as he started his Galilean ministry was that of a new righteousness to be achieved by a radical *metanoia*. He insisted on it as necessary for entering the Kingdom of God which he preached (Mt. 5: 20). It came as a new teaching in the same way as his teaching on the Kingdom was new. The immediate disciples of Jesus were all influenced by this teaching and they chose to follow him. But no one else in the early church was so well qualified as Paul was to speak with authenticity about the meaning and significance of the new righteousness Jesus preached. The rest of Jesus' disciples had all come from circles which did not give much thought to the Jewish righteousness, precisely because they were from among the ordinary people. Consequently it was easier for them to follow the teaching of Jesus without much rethinking. They did not have very much to be converted. The new did not seem to them as something absolutely new.

For Paul the situation was very different. He came directly from the ranks of those who had their own picture of righteousness. During his pre-christian period righteousness had been the great passion of his life. It was in the service thereof, and to establish the righteousness of the law, that he persecuted the christian congregation. So when, at Damascus he received the Lord's revelation, it meant a total collapse of all that he had laboured for up till then. If Jesus was the Messiah, the Kingdom of God was already at hand. The new age has come. But then the righteousness which made Paul a persecutor of the christian community was a false righteousness. God himself condemned it as sin; in its place he now establishes a totally new righteousness, the righteousness of God, the righteousness from God.

Only a person like Paul, himself having stood on the opposite side, the way of righteousness by the law, was capable of making clear for Christianity the new way of salvation which God has opened through Christ and of setting forth the righteousness of God in its absolute newness. The reason is because Paul knew both ways of salvation. From his former life he knew the law and the righteousness which it could effect; from his present experience he knew the gospel as the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes (1:16-17). Out of his experience, therefore, Paul was able to set one against the other. However, it is to be noted that Paul never speaks about his former life with resentment. As he writes to the Philippians, he was a perfect, blameless Pharisee (3:6); hence the righteousness from the law was something precious to him. But when he realized that there is a far better righteousness, the righteousness from God, he sacrificed his own way of attaining the righteousness by way of the observance of the law (Phil 3:9).

The letter to the Romans is the clearest and the boldest attempt made by Paul to analyse and explain the meaning and dimensions of God's righteousness over against man-made righteousness. The true worth of man is established in his relationship to God and his fellow beings. So long as man is not free he cannot have these correct relationships. Paul through his close acquaintance with Jews and Gentiles had



come to realize the inability of both of them to establish right relationships with God and among themselves. The description given by Paul of the Gentile world (1:18-32) and the Jewish world (2:1-3:8) with regard to their absolute incapacity to cope with the demands of their call and destiny is perhaps too shocking for many of us. Moreover, none of us would be prepared to equate the non christian religions of today with the Gentile religions of the letter to the Romans. It is equally true of the Jewish world as described by Paul (2:1-3:8).

In fact, it seems that today we have to understand these two sections of humanity more as models and symbols than as two separate groups. They have more to do with the type of religion practised than with the religion itself. Thus it could be that there is more of the counter-religion practised by christians than by non christians, especailly as described by Paul in 1:18-32. In other words, there is the "Gentile" in each one of us which is unwilling to recognise God and which endeavours to corrupt religion itself. In the same way, there is also the 'Jew' in everyone of us. It is the tendency within us by which we take pride in our being what we are and do not live in accordance with the demands of our call. It is an attitude within us through which we extol ourselves and despise others. And all of us have a share in it.

What we want to establish is that Paul's concrete description of humanity as divided into Gentiles and Jews and their unauthentic existence as sinners and transgressors are more symbolic and symptomatic in our times, and hence applicable to each one of us irrespective of our religious belongingness. Wherever there is the power of sin as man robbing God of his glory (Rom 3:23) and falling short of his created greatness as God's image and likeness, there is Jew as well as Gentile. Whenever man exercises his manhood as the basis of his being for-oneseelf, there is Jew as well as Gentile. Wherever man becomes lazy and careless about his life and destiny and takes refuge in meaningless attempts to safeguard his existence, there is sin. It is precisely this meaningless existence that we call the unauthentic human existence.

### Profile of an authentic person

For Paul an authentic person is a believer in Christ, a person who believes in the saving significance of the Christ event. He accepts that all what he can perform and achieve will not make him happy, even if there is nothing wrong in it. The reason is that in the given situation human life is surrounded by a number of opposing and oppressive powers which keep it enslaved. Only a person liberated from the tyranny of these powers can become authentic. This liberation, however, takes place through faith in the liberating power of Christ and the manifestation of God's saving righteousness.

According to Paul, there are three enemies, one related to the other, which enslave human life and make it unauthentic. They are the death, the sin and the law. Death is not merely the biological ceasing of life; it is the losing of oneself, the final tragedy of man's effort to hold himself. Even if we do not have to take it as the outcome of sin, death is a tragic phenomenon of man's loss of control on what he is and what he has. It is something which nobody would like to face, but everybody has to succumb to. The other enslaving power is the sin. Paul is very careful not to confuse his readers about the reality of sin, very often identified with the multiplicity of sins. Sin (*hamartia*) is a unique phenomenon, a force which came into the world with a power that can make man its slave. It is not so much the tendency in man to violate God's commandments as the basic orientation in man to fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23), an inborn nature by which man wants to be for himself. This tendency expresses itself through various actions which we call sins, used in the plural.

A third enslaving power in humanity is the law understood both as the Mosaic Law and also as every positive law in so far as law gives the positive directive about what to do, but does not give the inner power to act in accordance with its demands. The natural outcome is the violation of the law with the resulting sense of frustration. Moreover, the very experience of being controlled by an external power makes man feel that he is not free to be himself. The tragedy of the

Mosaic Law in the history of Israel and the subjection of Gentiles to man-made laws all left them with a feeling of frustration.

It is against the background of this situation that we have to understand the effort made by Paul to present the picture of an authentic man liberated from these enslaving powers. The created man is a slave of death, sin and law and he cannot come out of this enslavement by his own power. It is true of both Jews and Gentiles. It is true of every human being. But God has ordained things in such a way that he made it possible within the context of a plan of salvation with its beginning in the very act of creation. The history of humanity from the beginning developed in such a way that God guided it towards a convergence. The meeting point of this history is the Christ event in which God definitively revealed his saving righteousness (Rom 3:21) and enabled a broken humanity to become authentic.

The new righteousness which Jesus preached during his earthly ministry was definitively revealed in his death and resurrection. Yahweh, who liberated Israel out of Egypt and made them into a covenant community, had his promises of a new messianic era to be characterized by a new righteousness. This era is now revealed in Christ when God publicly manifested him as the source and model for every human being to become authentic. Through a profound act of faith in the saving significance of his death and resurrection, every human being can achieve his authenticity. God's saving power revealed in Jesus Christ and its abiding presence in the Spirit of the risen Christ makes it possible for every human being to develop his personality and make it authentic. Freed from the threefold powers of death, sin and law, this new power enables the believer to experience his divine sonship and address God 'Abba'. Paul explains the various aspects of this liberated existence in Romans 8:1-39.

### **Orthodoxy versus Orthopraxis**

After having analysed the many aspects and dimensions of an authentic life, Paul goes on to explain how man has to respond to what God has done. God's action in Christ and

the revelation of his righteousness are an invitation to him to regulate and develop his life in accordance with the gift of God. Paul writes: "So, my brothers, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer. Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this aeon, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God - what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect" (12:1-2).

Christian life is more than conformity with a system of laws and regulations. It is a living sacrifice to God, it is a life of service to God and to his people. Religion and worship are both implied in it. It is the inner authenticity and beauty of life that makes it meaningful and this comes from its sacrificial character. The true sacrifice of life consists in its courage not to conform to the style and standards of the passing world, and in its readiness to allow God to work in man, transforming him from within through a radical *metanoia*. Every christian thus is enabled to discover the will of God and his good pleasure, to discern what is good and mature.

Once this personal dimension of life is safeguarded through the direct control of God, the details of the communitarian life of the individual become more meaningful. The Christian understands his life as subordinated to the well being of a community in the same way as a member is integrated into the body. His actions are regulated and his attitudes are controlled by his higher convictions. Love becomes the rule of his life (13:8-10). He respects others and has consideration for the weak. He tries to please others more than himself. Once he has established the sound principles of an authentic life, he has the whole gamut of life open to him as influenced and inspired by the power of God.

### Pauline World and our World

We have seen the profound and abiding message of the letter to the Romans, a message which has come down to us from a world and culture entirely foreign to us. What we have tried is to emphasize those factors which have values beyond



the limitations of time and space. At the same time it is important that we do not absolutize any teaching of Paul for the simple fact that it is contained in this letter. It is the task of exegeses to discover the abiding values of the inspired Word of God and to distinguish it from secondary issues. The failure of historical criticism in biblical exegesis has been its incapacity to pay attention to this fact.

It may be useful to study a few cases where we need to have the utmost care not to absolutize Pauline teaching when we explain this letter to a group of Indian students. As we have noted above, it would be absolutely absurd to conclude from the description of Gentile religions in Rom 1:18-32 that all non-christian religions in this country can be put into this category. Paul made use of a diatribe style, current in Judaism, to show the ineffectiveness of idolatry and the evil of immorality (Wis 13:1-10). Could we conclude from this that we have to use the same language when we speak about the non-christian religions in this country? By no means. Also to be noted is the aspect of pessimism that is current in the whole Pauline discussion on man (3:9-20). For the strength of his argument Paul had to do that, very often collecting citations from the Psalms. But to conclude therefrom that we have to continue to think of mankind the same way may be questioned today.

Another example is Paul's great concern about the future of Judaism. As a Jew, he had to be concerned and worried about their destiny. As a believer he had his hope about the final conversion of all Jews in so far as they belonged to the chosen people. But it would be just a utopian and wishful thinking if anyone wanted to conclude from this to the conversion of Jews *en bloc* precisely because Paul wrote about it in 90 verses!! This is all the more so when we take into account the fact that christianity is still a minority and a "little flock" and that it will continue to be so always.

In spite of these limitations, the richness of Paul's theology and anthropology in the letter to the Romans is something unparalleled. The reason for this is that his theology was less an abstract speculation on man, his nature and destiny and more a reflection on the existential dimensions of life which Paul himself was familiar with. Our task today is to rediscover this insight and translate it into our terms and vocabularies and make it the basis of our own theological reflection and consequent action.

# The Gospel of John in the Indian Context

A proper understanding of any piece of writing has to take into account the author's purpose in writing it. Therefore our interpretation and understanding of the Gospel of John in the Indian context should necessarily start with a clear notion of the purpose of the author in writing his Gospel.

## The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel

The problem of the purpose of the Fourth Gospel had been subjected to discussion already from the middle of the second century A. D., and a variety of opinions have been expressed about this problem over the centuries. After all these discussions, we may say that "the question of the destination and purpose of the Gospel is as wide open as it ever was"<sup>1</sup>

The remarkable thing is that, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John explicitly mentions his purpose in writing the Gospel in Jn 20:30-31 which reads: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." These words show that the Gospel is addressed to a definite reading public which is addressed as 'you', and that it is written with a definite purpose in mind. Also the author's choice of distinctive material and terminology as well as the general tenor and structure of the Gospel forces upon us the conclusion that it was written with a definite destination and purpose.

## Different Opinions

Commentators on John have suggested many motives that may have prompted the writing of the Gospel.

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1. Cf. J. A. Robinson, "The Destination and purpose of St. John's Gospel", in *Twelve NT Studies*, London, 1962, p. 107.

## 1. To supplement or replace the synoptic gospels

The view that John was aware of some deficiency in the Synoptic Gospels and wrote his Gospel primarily to supplement them has remained the traditional view upto the present day. We find it expressed by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysostom and Eusebius in the early period and by scholars as B. F. Westcott, W. F. Howard, C. K. Barrett and others in modern times. The idea that John wanted to produce a Gospel *par excellence* which would render the other Gospels superfluous is found in the Muratorian Canon of around 200 A. D. This idea was advocated by scholars as R. Windisch, E. C. Hoskyns and others.

It is to be noted that the supplement and replacement theories are based on the assumption that John knew one or more of the Synoptics. But on closer examination of evidence, John's dependence on or use of any of the Synoptics cannot be conclusively proved. Besides, John is seen to be the work of an independent writer based on an independent strand of primitive Gospel tradition.

## 2. The polemics against the different anti-Christian groups

At the end of the second century A. D., Ireneus suggested that John was written to refute the rising heresies of the Nicolaitans and Cerinthus. The polemical purpose is advocated by Theodore of Mopsuestia and Cyril of Alexandria too. Modern scholars have identified several other polemics in John, such as against the cult of John the Baptist (Jn 1:6-8, 15, 19-34; 3:22-30), against the Samaritans (Jn 4:3.42), against the Jews (Jn chapters 5-10), against the Gnostics and so on.<sup>2</sup>

The polemics against the proposed groups can be inferred from different passages. But to make it as the decisive element in writing the Gospel does not do justice to the pur-

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2. R. E. Strachan, E. D. Freed and W. G. Kuemmel subscribe to this polemic purpose of John.

pose of the author, because the affirmations that the Evangelist makes in all these passages are so Christological and soteriological that their kerygmatic import is quite evident.

### 3. Pastoral or missionary purpose

The view that John wrote his Gospel with a pastoral purpose to help the Christians to hold on to their faith and to instruct them in the implications of their faith is held by many as Aileen Guilding, C. K. Barrett, R. V. G. Tasker and others. On the other hand, there are still others who hold that John wrote his Gospel with a missionary purpose, namely, to evangelize those who did not as yet believe. This view is held by scholars as C. H. Dodd, J. A. T. Robinson, W. C. Van Unnik and others.

This twofold position is supported by the two variant readings in Jn 20:30-31. The pastoral purpose is supported by reading *hina pisteuete* which means 'that you may continue to believe' or 'that you may go on believing'. The use of the present subjunctive of the verb *pisteuein* suggests that John's readers were already Christians and therefore the Gospel was written to deepen their faith. Besides, the Gospel contains much that can nurture and deepen the faith of the Christians such as: statement implying the pre-existence or divinity of Christ (Jn 1:4, 14, 18; 10:30), the discourse on the Bread of Life (6:35-59), the imagery of the Shepherd and the Sheep (10:1-18, 22-30), of the vine and the branches (15:1-11), the farewell discourse (Jn Chapters 14-17) etc.

The missionary purpose was supported by the variant reading *hina pisteuete* (that you may come to believe) in 20:31. The use of the ingressive aorist subjunctive of the verb *pisteuein* suggests that the readers were not as yet Christians and therefore needed to be evangelized and brought to faith in Jesus Christ. The universalism (Jn 3:16; 4:4-42; 10:20) and the stress on the mission of Jesus and his disciples (Jn 3:17; 5:38; 6:57; 7:28 f; 17:18; 20:21) in the Gospel also point to this direction. The missionary purpose itself can be specified as directed to the Jewish world or the Hellenistic world.



In fact we have indications pointing to all these directions. Therefore it would be wise not to look for one single aim and then to interpret the whole Gospel with that aim in mind. It may be perfectly legitimate to find several aims of the Gospel reflected in the different redactions or editions that can be traced in the Gospel of John.<sup>3</sup> Hence we can say that John's Gospel is a complex reality of depth and multiple resonance. John had been sensitive to the currents of the time. He had an intellectual daring to enter into the varied background and fill them with new meaning. Therefore understanding the Gospel needs prolonged study and loving contemplation.

Still, whatever be the different aims and purposes of the Gospel, all these should be subordinated to the one dominating purpose which gives the Gospel its main thrust and unity. This is to be found in Jn 20:30-31 apart from all considerations as regards the polemical, pastoral or missionary purposes.

### John's own statement in 20:30-31

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:30-31).

This statement qualifies the content of the Gospel as 'signs' which Jesus did in the presence of his disciples. The term 'signs' here is subject to different interpretations. While some hold that it refers only to the miracles of Jesus narrated in the first part of the Gospel,<sup>4</sup> others hold that it refers to the miracles in the first part and the post resurrection appearances in the second part<sup>5</sup>. We would prefer to agree with Lagrange and Bultmann who hold that the term 'signs' here refers to the whole content of the Gospel. This is the only place in the second part of the Gospel where the term *semeion*

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3. Cf. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, I-XII New York 1966, XXIV-XL

4. Cf. K. H. Rengstorff, TWNT VII, p. 253-54

5. Cf. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to St. John*, Vol. II, New York, 1970, p. 1058-1059

is used and in the second part it is not applied to any of the resurrection appearances as applied to the miracles in the first part. Therefore it is a unique case and it should be interpreted accordingly. In John the words and deeds of Jesus are integral parts of the Revelation and the discourses form part of the miracles. In fact there is a wonderful unity between the miracles and the accompanying discourses. We can say that the miracles are interpreted in the discourses and the discourses are illustrated in the miracles. Hence both the words and deeds of Jesus are signs that reveal the mystery of Jesus as Christ and Son of God.

The two titles 'Christ' and 'Son of God' are not synonymous. Through-out the Gospel John demands not only belief that Jesus is the Messiah predicted by the prophets but also belief that Jesus came forth from the Father as his special representative in the world (11:42; 16:27, 30; 17:8), that Jesus and the Father share a special presence to one another (14:11) and that Jesus bears the divine name "I AM" (8:24; 13:19). If the title 'Christ' emphasizes his role or function, the title 'Son of God' emphasizes his being. Now, since the role of Jesus in John is primarily to reveal God being the Word of God (1:1-2), and since he does this by being united with God in the Father-Son relationship (1:18), we can say that the function and being in Jesus are so intimately related. So both titles present Jesus as the Revelation of God's Life to man. The earthly existence of Jesus has served as a sign or as a series of signs, for which the Gospel narratives have supplied a commentary, pointing towards the Life of God revealing itself. Once one has been in Jesus this unique revealer of God (Christ and Son of God) and has recognised and experienced God's Life in Jesus, one believes and possesses eternal life, because Jesus is the sacramental sign of that life.

From the above considerations, we can see that the major thrust of the statement in 20:30-31 reflects the evangelist's desire to deepen the faith of those who were already Christians, so that they would appreciate Jesus as the unique Revealer of the Father or God's life and thus grow in this life.

# John's Testimony in 1 Jn 1:1-4

A similar purpose is expressed in I Jn 1:1-4 by John in presenting his epistle. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life - the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you so that you may have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ". We give below the different elements contained in this text.

<i>Apostolic Experience</i>	<i>Christ - event</i>	<i>Sharing</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
We have heard	That which was	We testify	so that you may
We have seen	from the beginning		have
We have looked	Word of life	and proclaim	fellowship with
			us...our fellow-
We have touched	Life made manifest		ship...with the
	Eternal life		Father and His
			Son

*Apostolic Experience:* John is referring to the concrete historical experience of Jesus Christ. He is referring concretely to the words of Christ which the apostles heard, the deeds of Christ which they saw etc.

*Christ-event.* But the object of their hearing and seeing etc. is described as 'that which was from the beginning', the 'Word of life' etc. So the words and deeds of Jesus were signs leading the apostles to a reality beyond, namely, the Life of the Father which was in Jesus (Jn 1:4) and which was being revealed.

*Sharing.* It is to this 'life' that is revealed that they give testimony when they preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ by presenting his words and deeds.

*Purpose:* The purpose is to enable the readers or listeners to have the same experience and thus come to share in the same life which the apostles share and thus to effect a fellowship (*Koinonia*).

We have here a clear parallel statement on Jn 20:30-31. The content of the Gospel, namely, the words and deeds of Jesus recorded in the Gospel are signs inviting us to recognise and experience God's life revealed in Jesus and thus to believe in Jesus as the Word of Life (Christ and Son of God) and consequently to share in the same life.

From the above considerations we have to conclude that the Gospel of John is a document "from faith to faith". John is bearing witness to events which led him to faith experience and he is writing them to evoke or increase faith in the readers.

It is from this basic perspective that we have to discuss the problem of understanding the Gospel of John.

## **Trends in Present-day Interpretation of John**

### **1. Existential interpretation**

Bultmann propounds the Johannine kerygma in terms of an existential theology, presenting it consistently as a call of the Redeemer whereby man is faced with decision here and now as intended by the evangelist. The assertions are clad in the language of myth, which is explained by the use of a source consisting of 'Gnostic revelation discourses'. He saw in the fourth evangelist the supreme example of a process of demythologizing through which he wishes to disentangle the authentic and perpetually valid message from the trappings of a language of an older day.

### **2. Theological interpretation**

Anglican exegesis of John, represented by B. F. Westcott, E. C. Hoskyns and C. H. Dodd is alert to the Johannine theology following the "word by word" method of English scholarship. Christological and Soteriological aspects are developed. The OT and Jewish traditions behind John are assessed



and emphasized. C. H. Dodd analyses the Gospel against the background of comparative religion with a leaning towards a Platonizing view and a certain preference for the Hermetic Literature.

### 3. Symbolical interpretation

German commentators like H. Strathmann find John as a preacher and interpreter. According to them the historical element is for John a mere means of presenting his knowledge about Christ gained through personal contact, long meditation and inner experience. Symbolical explanations have taken various forms such as seeing symbolic connections in persons and numbers etc

### 4. Sacramental symbolism

A special form of the symbolical interpretation is to be found in the sacramental symbolism said to be contained in the Gospel. This line of approach was opened up by O. Cullmann and was taken up also by B. Vawter, P. Niewalda and L. Bouyer.

### 5. Typology

Another tendency in the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel which has gained a certain popularity is the question of typology. The Swedish scholar H. Sahlin and some Catholic exegetes from Spanish and French speaking countries have gone in this direction. These interpretations strive to depict the influence of the OT and the great traditions of Israel in the Gospel of John.<sup>6</sup>

### Historical Jesus

All the above approaches are valid and go along the lines of the purpose of the Gospel as we have indicated before. The interpretation should be existential. It is the apostolic experience of Christ that is witnessed to by John in his Gospel. This should in turn spark off in ourselves the living experience of Christ in our existential situation today. However we cannot close our eyes to the historical and theolo-

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6. Cf. J. M. Braun, *Jean le Theologien*, vol. II

gical aspects in the Gospel. The very fact that John chose to write a 'Gospel' shows that he is serious about the history. It is the concrete life and ministry of Jesus in history that is medium (sign) of the faith experience (I Jn 1:1-3).

### Historical critical method and its limitations

The historical critical method certainly helps us to enter into the historical and theological positions of the evangelist. We have to see the meaning of the words and statements in the context of the whole unit of the passage taking into account the specific literary form in which it is cast. But this method has also its limitations. It can create a situation of suspense of evaluative judgements and participational involvement which would result in a detached neutrality in matters of faith. Such neutrality is not neutrality at all, but a decision against responding. The true message of the Gospel can be understood only in terms of a lived response of faith.

### From faith to faith

The Gospel of John is a record of signs pointing to God revealing himself in Jesus Christ. It is not a communication of some abstract truths to be preserved and then to be understood now and responded to. Words recorded in the Gospel are for God a means - sign - to communicate himself, calling for a response of faith in the reader. This is clearly stated in Jn 20:30-31. The experience of God revealed in Christ witnessed to by John should re-create in ourselves the living experience of Christ in our life situations today. Therefore understanding the Gospel of John does not consist in the correct communication of the abstract truths contained in it, but in bringing about this new and living experience of the Johannine Christ in our own days.

### Referential meaning

The experiential character of the content of the Fourth Gospel, indicated by the term 'sign', demands, therefore, that the 'words' and 'expressions' in the Gospel passages have to be explained, paying attention not so much to their notional meaning, but to their referential meaning. They refer to an original experience, and we have to find out this original ex-

perience and then explain it in such a way as to re-create the same experience in the language of today. It is not the actual words that count, but the underlying experience that is pointed at through the words.

## In the Indian Context

When we interpret the Gospel of John in the Indian context, apart from the preceding considerations, the following specific features of the Gospel may be taken into consideration.

### 1. Open-ended language of John

John's language has a distinctive and strong universalistic character. This is particularly evident in his practice of employing words which have a double - Jewish and hellenist - background. John's ideas and terminology may have developed within the Palestinian heterodox Judaism under the influence of pressing Hellenism. But the very choice of such heterodox - Judaistic language shows that John is deliberately moving towards a wider world which seems approachable to him only through the kind of 'open ended' language we find in John. In using a terminology which awakened echoes in hellenistic language and speculation John was venturing out into a wider world where a new interpretation would be inevitable. Whatever be the actual source and background of John's language, he succeeded in producing a reader-oriented Gospel through a kind of process of transition from the Jewish to the hellenistic world. Perhaps the hellenistic language forms a bridge between the essentially Palestinian Gospel tradition and the vast world which lay within and beyond the hellenistic world. If it is true that the Indian philosophical ideas have infiltrated into Hellenism and through it into the Johannine milieu, as suggested by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan<sup>7</sup>, India could be included within the scope of the open-ended language of John.

### In the prologue

The open-ended language of the Gospel of John is also announced in the Prologue. The Johannine language that bri-

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7. Cf. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, London, 1933, p. 157

dges the christian world with the wider world is clearly seen in the arrangement of the Prologue. If the first half of the Prologue gives the divine-human encounter in general terms, the second half gives it in specific christian language. The following structural presentation will show it.

a	vv. 1-2	In the beginning was the Word... was with God
b	3-4	All things were made through him In him was Life...Light of men
c	5	Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it
d	9-10	The true light was in the world... and the world knew him not
e	11	He came to his own people...received him not
e <sup>1</sup>	12-13	Whoever received him...he gave power to become children of God
d <sup>1</sup>	14	The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us... We have seen his glory... as of the Only begotten Son full of Grace and Truth.
c <sup>1</sup>	16	From his fulness we have received Grace...
b <sup>1</sup>	17	The Law was given through Moses, Grace and Truth came through Jesus Christ.
a <sup>1</sup>	18	No one has ever seen God...the only Begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father...

a - d = vv. 1-10 1-10 general terms

e - e<sup>1</sup> = vv. 11-13 transition passage

d<sup>1</sup> - a<sup>1</sup> = vv. 14-18 specific christian terms.

If in the first half of the prologue John uses general terms like logos, God, all things, life, light, shines, darkness, world etc., in the second half he uses specific christian terms as the only begotten Son, Father, grace, truth, Jesus Christ, glory etc.<sup>8</sup>. The attempt of John to express his Christ-experi-

8. For a detailed analysis of the structure of the Prologue cf. M. Vellanickal, *The Divine Sonship of Christians in the Johannine Writings*, Rome, 1977, 132-136.



ence in a language that would awaken echoes in a non-christian world around him should remain always an inspiration and model for us to continue the same process in our own times.

### Jesus as Logos

John's presentation of Jesus as 'Logos' is quite interesting in the Indian context. In the words of Dr. Radhakrishnan, in his book *Principal Upanishads*, Hiranyagarbha in the Vedas answers to the Logos, the word, of western thought, and the corresponding Vedic term for Logos is *Vac* or *Vak* which means word or wisdom, and the first born of *Rta* is *Vac*". The similarity between the 'Word' in John's Gospel and the *Vak* in Hindu Scriptures seems to show that the Incarnation was the answer to the age-long prayer of the pre-christian religions.

The Logos, in the thought of John, seems to be in the last resort the very principle of all that is and all that lives, at once interior to everything and apart from everything, that very thing of which the ṛṣis had an intuition and into the heart of whose mystery they withdrew, calling it by the names of *Atman* and *Brahman*, self and absolute. This principle is in the depths of God, and is himself God.<sup>10</sup>

### Life and Light

"In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (Jn 1:4). This statement of John reminds us of the cry of the Indian sages: *Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya* and *Mṛtyor ma Amṛtam gamaya*, namely, "From darkness lead me to light" and "From death lead me to life".<sup>11</sup> The eager quest for life and light which India has been pursuing through the centuries was fully answered by Christ. The other upanishadic texts hinted at this: "Now the light which shines higher than this heaven, above all and above everything in the highest worlds..."

9. Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, as quoted in A. C. Bouquet, *Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religions*, p. 143

10. Cf Jn 1:1 where the 'Logos' is said to be with God and is God himself

11. Cf. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1:3,28

verily, that is the same as this light which is here within a person (*Puruṣa*)”<sup>12</sup>. “In the sheath of gold is Brahman pure, undivided, he shines light of lights... in him the sun does not shine nor the moon nor the stars, nor the flashes of lightning. He shines and everything shines by him. In his light all become luminous.”<sup>13</sup>

### Light as revelation of God

John uses the term ‘light’ in a revelatory sense, in line with the rest of the New Testament usage. In the New Testament this term occurs mostly in the baptismal texts and that connected with faith<sup>14</sup>. ‘Coming to light’ means ‘to accept the revelation in Christ’ and thus to believe in Christ’. “The light has come into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light” (Jn. 3:19-21). Therefore the light, that the Upanishads and even the Vedas sang of, is the revelation of the Father as John would see it<sup>15</sup>.

### Light of Life

For John Life and Light are identical. Viewed from the part of God life is the principle of activity. Jesus possesses this life in communion with the Father and manifests this life to men, thus becoming light to them. From the view-point of man, he accepts light in faith and consequently comes to the life of God. In both the cases Christ is the medium through whom life is manifested and communicated.

St. John continues to say that “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1:5). The ‘darkness’ here probably refers to the diabolic power active in the world. The Isha Upanishad uses the symbolism of light and darkness to signify the same idea. “He who has refused to surrender to the brilliant light of the Atman in the depths of his being is like a man who has deprived himself of life on

12. Cf. Chandogya Upanishad 3. 13. 7

13. Mundaka II. 2. 9-10

14. Cf. 2 Cor 4:4; 4:6; Eph 1:17-18; 5:8, 9, 14; Heb 6: 4, 5

15. Cf Rig Veda 1. 50. 10 looking at the transcendent light beyond the darkness the Light which is more excellent

the physical level. What can he hope for now but eternal darkness?"<sup>16</sup>.

## Knowledge and Life

John continues to say: "The true light that enlightens every man...was in the world...yet the world knew him not" (Jn 1:9-10). Christ the light came to give us life (Jn 10:10) and he does this by giving us the true knowledge: "And this is eternal life that they know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (Jn 17:3). Those who refuse to know the mystery of the Father are liable to death. Liberation from this death according to the Upanishads is *jñāna*<sup>17</sup>. This knowledge is obtained not by study but it is given<sup>18</sup>. The Johannine Logion of the Synoptic Gospels tells us too that "No one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and he to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Mt 11:27; Lk 10:22). Also in John we have the same idea: "No one comes to the Father but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also" (Jn 14:6-7).

These are a few examples of the open-ended language of John that can bridge the christian world with the non-Christian world of India. Of course it needs a deeper study of the language of John as well as that of the Hindu Scriptures.

## 2. Symbolical Language

John's Gospel abounds in Symbolism. The term used by John are often to be understood in two senses: material and spiritual.<sup>19</sup> Thus, for example, 'to follow Jesus' means to go after him (1:37-38) and also to become his disciple (1:48; 8:12).

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16. Cf. Abhishiktananda, *Hindu Christian Meeting Point*, p. 75

17. Cf. Kausitaki Up. 1.2 ff

18. Cf. Katha Up. 1.2. 23-25

19. Cf. O. Cullmann, "Der Johanneische Gebrauch doppeldeutigen Ausdrücke als schlüssel zum verstaendnis des vierten Evangeliums" *Theol. Zeit.* 4 (1948). pp. 360-372.

The Temple of Jerusalem becomes the new temple of the body of the risen Christ (2:21). The word *Pneuma* signifies the 'wind', the 'breath' and the 'Spirit' (3:8; 19:30; 20:22). The 'living water' is the water of the springs but signifying the spiritual water which wells up into eternal life (4:10-14). In fact there is a rich store of symbols in John such as, Light, Door, Way, Shepherd, Vine Branches, Seed, Water, Bread, etc. These symbols are universal and related mostly to the ordinary life situations of man.

Here again the Indian will feel quite at home with the Johannine language. As a matter of fact, man everywhere has recourse to these symbols whenever he begins to speak about mysteries as John does. The universal symbols used by John and the experience of the mystery revealed through them will certainly form a bridge between the Gospel and the Hindu Scriptures.

However, while the symbolical language forms a bridge between the Johannine and the Indian religious experiences, we need also to stress the difference and uniqueness of the symbolisms found in John. In general, we could say that in John symbolism deepens into sacramentalism. The Johannine symbols are not mere symbols evoking the invisible depths of the mysteries they represent, but they make present the mysteries as real and actual and therefore one has to recognise their sacramental character. For example, the symbolism of food as a means of sustenance and participation is a universal symbol. Sharing in the same bread symbolizes the unity between those who share it. But when Jesus says in John 6 "I am the Bread of life" the depths of reality which this symbol of bread reaches are certainly beyond human conventions. The bread there represents the sacramental reality of the flesh and blood of Christ. Hence one has to give due consideration to the specific features of the Johannine symbolism when compared to those in the other Indian religious systems.

### 3. Contemplative Gospel

The Fourth Gospel is a contemplative Gospel in so far as the stress is laid not on preaching but on bearing witness



to Christ. This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true (21:24). Such a declaration is meaningful. John differs from the Synoptic Gospels in this regard. Nowhere in John do we find the Synoptic terms evangelize, Gospel, announce, proclaim etc. On the other hand the words 'testimony' and 'bear witness' occur frequently in John.

The one who 'bears witness' is the one who 'has seen'. These two verbs are put side by side in John. This can be seen in the case of John the Baptist (1:32,34) John the evangelist (19:35) and Jesus himself (3:11,32). This seeing is used in a sense of contemplating. In I Jn 4:14 John says: "We have seen (contemplated) and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world". That which he has seen, is the sending of Jesus from the part of the Father as the Saviour of the world. So it is a seeing through the glory of the Word become flesh (1:14).

The union with God and with Christ is certainly a theme characteristic of the Fourth Gospel. The theme of union or oneness is developed in John at many levels such as: Jesus' unity with the Father (cf Jn 5:19, 26; 10:30, 38; 14:11; 17:10). Jesus' unity with the believers (cf Jn 15:1-5), the communion of life between the believers and the Father, Son and the Spirit (cf Jn 14:19-20) etc. This theme of union must have been the reason why John's Gospel has been the inspiration of countless searches after oneness with God. Specially in India where the Hindu advaitic or viśiṣṭadvaitic thinking is so much part of the religious life of the people, the Gospel of John will find a greater acceptance.

Here again we will have to make the necessary distinctions between Johannine thought and advaitic thought. However, it remains true that with this contemplative approach and the theological stress of union between God and man the Indian feels at home with the Gospel of John precisely because of his contemplative rather than rational turn of mind and the religious background.

# The Contributions of Paul Ricoeur to Biblical Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics started as a discipline of principles governing biblical interpretation. But in the course of time it developed into a universal discipline applicable to the interpretation of any type of human communication and subsequently it came to be divided into two, namely, biblical hermeneutics and general or philosophical hermeneutics. Recently there has been an attempt to apply the principles applied in general hermeneutics to biblical hermeneutics. In this attempt the contributions of the great French philosopher Paul Ricoeur deserve special attention. He not only tried to incorporate the theories of the general hermeneutics into biblical hermeneutics but even tried to work out a convergence or a fusion of the two.

For a long time hermeneutics was considered only a philological exegesis. But thanks to the great pioneering efforts of hermeneutical thinkers like Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and others hermeneutics was developed from a philological exegesis into a "general hermeneutics" whose principles can serve as the foundation for all kinds of textual interpretation. Paul Ricoeur further broadened and deepened the scope of hermeneutics by reinforcing it with his own philosophy as well as linguistic and existential philosophies.

Paul Ricoeur is one of the greatest of living philosophers. He is versatile and his areas of scholarship extend to many disciplines of philosophy. But his main concern in almost all of his writings is hermeneutics. With his versatile competency in different areas of philosophy he has tried to create a comprehensive hermeneutical philosophy which culminates in biblical hermeneutics.

The importance of Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics is its philosophical foundation and his attempt to synthesise the general and the biblical hermeneutics. His biblical hermeneutics comes as the culmination of his hermeneutical philosophy. In

his hermeneutics he presupposes the theories of hermeneutical thinkers like Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and has incorporated the theories of different philosophical schools. Thus we have in his hermeneutics his own philosophy of symbol and psycho-analysis, the main issues of linguistic philosophy like the dialectics of speech and writing, the concept of distanciation, the polysemic character of language, the role of metaphor in language, the special "poetic" dimension of language, and the theories of phenomenology, existentialism and of some of the important linguistic schools like Structuralism and Formalism. Ricoeur has interpreted the biblical writings on purely philosophical grounds in a manner which will be acceptable to both the biblical scholars as well as to the philosophers. Thus his biblical hermeneutics will be an important meeting ground for both philosophy and theology. So Ricoeur's contributions to biblical hermeneutics are highly significant and overwhelming.

### **The Philosophical Dimension**

Ricoeur has developed a comprehensive hermeneutics which culminates in biblical hermeneutics. The philosophical ideas of Freud, Heidegger, and Nietzsche have contributed much in the evolution of his hermeneutical philosophy. He tried to incorporate the relevant insights of the linguistic philosophy. In an all embracing bid he tries to achieve a synthesis of all these diverse strands of enquiry of human existence and attempts an all encompassing hermeneutical philosophy. And finally he tries to apply this all inclusive hermeneutics to the interpretation of biblical scriptures.

Ricoeur's own philosophy of symbol is an important aspect of his hermeneutics. At first he defined symbol and hermeneutics in terms of each other. But afterwards, he shifted his interest from symbolic interpretation to textual interpretation. He begins his hermeneutical investigations by analysing its roots in the ordinary language. The ordinary language is characterised by what is known as the "polysemy" of words. Polysemy is a trait of words because of which they have more than one significance when they are considered outside their use in a particular context. The context determines the parti-

cular meaning of the polysemic word. Therefore it is from the context that we discern the concrete exchange of meaning between the communicator and the communicant. The same process is going on in hermeneutics. It is the process of the discernment of the meaning of the words used in that context. What happens in the text interpretation and what constitutes the key problem of hermeneutics are already foreshadowed in the interpretative process in the ordinary language.

Even though Ricoeur is mainly a philosopher of interpretation theory he tried to apply his philosophy of interpretation to biblical hermeneutics. Almost all of his works are at least obliquely related to the interpretation of scripture. Moreover the lines separating one from the other are less distinct today. We can see a convergence of philosophical hermeneutics and biblical hermeneutics not only in the works of Ricoeur but also in the works of biblical scholars like Crossan, Perrin, Funk and others.<sup>1</sup>

Ricoeur's main concern in his biblical hermeneutics was to connect the biblical hermeneutics with the general hermeneutics. What is a text? What is the relation between spoken and written language? What is understanding in relation to text explanation? What is the relation between a structural analysis and existential appropriation? These are the main questions Ricoeur tries to answer in his general hermeneutics.

Ricoeur says that these concerns are equally important for biblical hermeneutics as well and that biblical hermeneutics, though it has an identity of its own, can be developed with the support of general hermeneutics. In the light of his hermeneutical philosophy he examines the character of religious texts, the concept of revelation, the notion of inspiration and so on in biblical hermeneutics.

In hermeneutics we have to take into account, in addition to the symbolic function of language, the metaphorical nature of language, the polysemic character of words, and the

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1) Cf. L. Dornish, "symbolic systems and the interpretation of scripture" *Semeia* 4 (1975) pp. 1-22.



dimension of "work". He also recognizes the importance of structuralism, and other linguistic disciplines in hermeneutics. But he is opposed to the structuralist view of taking language as a closed system of signs. Over against this view of linguistic philosophers Ricoeur says that language has the capacity to refer to extra-linguistic reality.

### **The Linguistic Dimension**

Language can be broadly divided into two, namely, the oral speech and the written language. Here Ricoeur has made use of the fruits of the researches made by the famous linguistic scholars like Ferdinand De Saussure, and J. L. Austin in linguistics. His study of the theories of these linguistic scholars convinced him that the dynamics of the transition from speech to writing is of great significance to hermeneutics. In writing, the original speech or oral discourse (as he calls it to distinguish it from the written language which he calls the written discourse) is transformed into a written code. But unfortunately the written language is only a poor representation of the message content of the original speech discourse. Many factors of the former speech discourse are lost in this process of transformation. The relation between the speaker and the hearer is affected in this transition. In the oral discourse the mental intention of the speaker and the meaning coincide; but in the written discourse this does not happen. With inscription, the written text gets what he calls a "semantic autonomy" which is of tremendous importance for hermeneutics. It shows that the textual meaning cannot be identified with the intention of the author even though the identification of the author's meaning is equally important for hermeneutics. In the written language the spoken discourse addressed to a second person becomes addressed, at least potentially, to any person who can read.

With writing, the written text gets a new existence which is different from the original intention of the author and the original expression. This is known in hermeneutics as *distanciation*. There are three kinds of *distanciation* in writing: (1) *distanciation* from the author, (2) *distanciation* from the situation of the discourse, and (3) *distanciation* from the original audience.

Speaking in the terminology of the existential philosophy of Heidegger, Ricœur says that the task of interpretation is to explicate a sort of being in the world unfolded in front of the text. Elaborating this point further he observes "actually what is to be interpreted in a text is proposed world, a world that I might inhabit and wherein I might project my ownmost possibilities".<sup>2</sup> This he calls the world of the text. This world is not the world of the everyday experience but a particular apprehension of reality through the fictional language. Through fiction and poetry new possibilities of being in the world, are opened up within the everyday reality and thus being is introduced not through the modality of ordinary tangible reality, rather, through the modality of possibility. This new apprehension of reality metamorphizes our experience of the every-day-reality. The dimension of work gives a written language a distanciation of its own kind. The particular characteristics of a work are the genre of the composition and the style of the author.

The use of metaphor in language is another important factor Ricoeur considers in his hermeneutics. Metaphor is a creative use of polysemy. He also relates metaphor with symbol. For him metaphor is the connecting link between symbol and language.

## Biblical Hermeneutics

### a) General

In the light of his studies in general hermeneutics Ricoeur says that biblical hermeneutics should take seriously the transformations that might have occurred in the transition of the biblical writings from speech to writing and subsequent redactions. The relation between speech and writing is important for the biblical scriptures. In the biblical writings sometimes speech mediates between two forms of writing, as Jesus' speech does between the two testaments; or sometimes writing mediates between two forms of speech as the Gospels do between the preaching of the primitive church and all contem-

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2) P. Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973) p. 141.

porary preaching. Ricoeur considers the Bible just like any other forms of writing and speech as far as its composition is concerned. But he sees the uniqueness of the biblical text in what he calls its "issue" or the "world of the text". Analysing the biblical writings in the light of recent developments in linguistics and structural analysis Ricoeur observes that the content of the biblical documents is inseparable from their forms of discourse such as the narrative, the prophetic, the parabolic, the hymnic etc. He says that these different forms of discourse in the Bible constitute a circular system and that the theological content of each of them receives its signification from the total consolidation of these forms of discourse. Hence he concludes that the religious language is a "polyphonic language sustained by the circularity of forms".<sup>3</sup>

The biblical discourse, or any other religious discourse, for that matter, falls under the category of poetic language which has a special way of referring to reality. Therefore, for him the task of biblical hermeneutics is to find out this "reference" to reality of the biblical discourse; to use the terminology of existential philosophy, the task of hermeneutics is to allow the world, the being or the "issue" of the biblical text to unfold itself. He identifies this being with the new world, new covenant, the kingdom of God, a new birth etc. mentioned in the Bible.

About the biblical revelation he says that it pertains to the "issue" of the biblical writings. The world projected by the Bible is a case *par excellence* of the poetic language in general. In this hermeneutics of biblical revelation he first of all tries to arrive at a proper understanding of the concept of revelation. He advocated that we should carry the notion of revelation to its primary expressions of faith. It cannot be understood in a univocal sense. The different types of biblical discourse, like the prophetic, the narrative, prescriptive, wisdom and hymnic carry revelation not in the same measure and intensity but in different degrees.

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3) P. Ricoeur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and 'Theological Hermeneutics'". *Studies in Religion*, A Canadian Journal V, I (1975/6) p. 24.

Commenting upon the conflicting stands taken by the biblical scholars and the philosophers Ricoeur says that both sides should relinquish their extreme claims: religion should give up its claim that revelation has nothing to do with reason, and philosophy its claim to 'complete transparency of truth and a total autonomy of the thinking subject'. He has convincingly demonstrated that the absolute independence of revelation from reason as claimed by religions or the complete autonomy of the thinking subject as claimed by philosophy is a myth. He has also shown that the revelatory quality of the biblical discourse pertains to its poetic dimension. Just as the poetic text in general refers to a reality which is not immediately tangible to us, the biblical text opens up to a transworldly reality which science or philosophy cannot object to.

### **b) Parables**

After having given a general hermeneutics of biblical writings and a hermeneutics of biblical revelation Ricoeur gives a hermeneutics of the parables of Jesus. His hermeneutics of the parables is based on the structural semiotics developed by the Formalist and the Structuralist schools of linguistic philosophy to which he adds the approach of Dan O. Via, which was mainly based on American literary criticism. The main thrust of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the parables, is his linguistic and the existentialistic analysis of the parables. He sees both the linguistic and the existentialistic dimensions at work in the parable. Linguistically he considers the parable as the conjunction of a narrative form and a metaphorical process. It is the plot which gives to a narrative of the parable the quality of a metaphor.

Ricoeur says that the linguistic dimension alone cannot account for the uniqueness of the parable, but that it is the existentialistic thrust of the parable that best explains the specific religious character of the parabolic discourse. Speaking in the existentialistic terminologies of Karl Jaspers Ricoeur says that a parable is the "limit-expressions" of the "limit-experiences" of man. The limit-expressions are the expressions of peak experiences of man like the experience of death, suffering, guilt etc. which are also described as boundary situations by Karl Jaspers. Hence, for Ricoeur, the hermeneutics



a parable will be the deciphering of the limit-experience of human life expressed in the parables. The limit expression in the parable is done by what he calls the "extravagance" in the parables. He gives a number of examples for the extravagance in the parables. Consider, for example, the extravagance of the land lord in the parable of the wicked husbandmen, who after having sent his servants sends his own son. What palestinian property owner living abroad would be foolish enough to act like this land-lord, asks Ricoeur. It is in the hermeneutics of the parables that Ricoeur has attempted to incorporate more the insights of the linguistic philosophies and existentialism than in other parts.

### Conclusion

Ricoeur's attempt to graft existential philosophy to the linguistic philosophies in his hermeneutics is a great contribution to biblical hermeneutics. Up till now most of the attempts to give a philosophical footing to biblical hermeneutics was in the line of linguistic philosophies. But linguistic philosophy has got its inherent weaknesses and limitations. It considers language as a closed system. So it was opposed to biblical talk about extra linguistic realities. But Ricoeur could successfully solve this problem, by combining the insights of the linguistic and existential philosophies. He has also succeeded in establishing on purely philosophical grounds the justifiability of the biblical talk about transworldly and spiritual realities. In other words he philosophically justifies the religious discourse of the biblical scriptures. Usually this has been a hard bone of contention between the biblical scholars and the philosophers. So Ricoeur's contribution in this regard is very great.

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# Book Reviews

F. F. Bruce, *Men and Movements in the primitive Church*,  
The Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1979. pp 159.  
price £ 6.50

The work under review is a collection of studies in Early non-Pauline Christianity. It is an undeniable fact that together with the Pauline form of Christianity there were also other presentations which were valid and recognised in the early church. Prof. Bruce deals with some such issues: Peter and the Eleven; Stephen and other Hellenists; James and the Church of Jerusalem and John and his circle. The studies are meant to show that there is a variety of ways in which the reality of the church can be understood.

In fact, Paul was happy with some of these presentations; but against others he found it necessary to put his readers on their guard.

Peter the 'Rock' chosen by Jesus, as Bruce says, had in him the capacity to be the stone of offence and a rock of stumbling (Is 8:14) as well as a rock of stability (Mt 16:18,23). In fact, he played both roles. But thanks to the intercession which his master made for him in a critical hour, he strengthened his brothers and became a rock of stability and a focus of unity (p. 48). Stephen and other Hellenists had a different role to play. They it was who exercised the centrifugal force in the early church and made the gospel go out of Jerusalem. It all started with the anti temple speech of Stephen and it developed through the preaching of Philip. The founding of the church of Antioch was a milestone in the progress of this movement.

James, the brother of Lord, was still another powerful leader. Considered as one of the three 'pillars' (Gal 2:9) and apostle, James wielded great power and influence in the Jerusalem church. Paul refers to this James as one to whom risen Lord

appeared (1 Cor 15:7). It is surmised that in the course of history the importance of James in the Jerusalem church grew to such an extent that he almost replaced Peter, especially after the latter's escape from Herod Agrippa's prison. Josephus gives an account of the death of James as happening in A. D. 62.

'John and his circle' concludes the study. Though Paul had stayed three years in Ephesus, the dominant name from the apostolic age which dominates the Ephesian tradition is that of John. 2 Tim 1:15 may give a clue to the disappearance of Paul's importance in Ephesus. At any rate, it is John who became prominent in this church together with the circle of disciples that grew up there. The author tries to evaluate the traditions regarding the John of the Gospel and Revelation.

These studies by Bruce is yet another reminder to those who have developed a monolithic concept of the church starting from the moment when Jesus promised to found his church on Simon Peter to the present manifestation of it. The church is one, but its manifestation can and do vary from time to time and the shape of the church still to come is not all too clear, except the fact that Christ is its head and that the Spirit of Christ will guide it.

J. Mattam

Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*

(Tr. by John Bowden),

Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1979, pp. IX+149 Price \$ 8.95.

Martin Hengel, a prominent Tübingen scholar, Professor of New Testament and Early Judaism, has presented in this study some very thought-provoking ideas about the christian origins. Hengel departs very much from radical New Testament scholarship in supporting the historical integrity of the Acts of the Apostles. According to him Luke's account is historically reliable and it does provide resources for reconstructing the development of early christianity.

The book has three parts: Part one deals with History-Writing in Antiquity and in the Earliest Christianity. Part Two is: The Decisive Epoch of the History of Earliest Christianity: The Development of a world wide Mission. Part Three is Historical Methods and the Theological Interpretation of the New Testament. In Part one Hengel examines the nature of Luke's historical-theological method, the extent and reliability of the sources for Acts, and the values of the historical critical method. In Part Two the author analyses the textual evidence for constructing a history of the decisive periods of the earliest church: the Jerusalem setting and the apostolic council, Peter's mission, the break through in Antioch, and Paul's mission to the Gentiles. Part three deals with the limitations of historical methods when we deal with the theological interpretation of the New Testament.

Written with clarity and uncommon authority, the work is a challenge to many of the easy assumptions made by theologians who ignore historical knowledge and an interest in history. For Hengel Luke is a theological historian of Christianity. The radical 'redaction-critical' approach so popular today, which sees Luke above all as a freely inventive theologian, mistakes his real purpose. Luke was a christian historian and he set out to report the events of the past that provided the foundation for the faith and its extension.

As a test case Hengel reconstructs the period between the persecution of the Hellenistic christians (Acts 8:1-2) and the apostolic council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35). Though it is not a history of primitive christianity, we can still see in it how the first community in Jerusalem developed into the worldwide mission of Paul.

This book by Hengel is a real contribution towards understanding the Acts of the Apostles and the history of earliest christianity. Students of Acts who are used to read only the works of H. Conzelmann and E. Haenchen will find this work thought-provoking and impressive and at times upsetting.

J. Pathrapankal



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